THE CAREER OF BEAUTY DARLING

DOLF WYLLARDE

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THE CAREER OF BEAUTY DARLING

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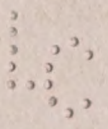
VERSES

THE CAREER OF BEAUTY DARLING

BY

DOLF WYLLARDE

AUTHOR OF "THE UNOFFICIAL HONEYMOON," "THE RIDING MASTER," "THE STORY OF EDEN," ETC.



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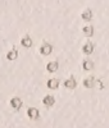

To———

"YEA, I KNOW IT. HOLD YE YOUR PEACE"

THE CAREER OF BEAUTY DARLING

CHAPTER I

THE Spring had come, even in the London suburbs. All along the road from Wimbledon into Merton the scraps of hedges had broken into leaf, and on waste pieces of ground grew starved buttercups and sainfoin which the dirty schoolchildren had spared to pick. May had been cold so far, but there had been plenty of sun. Now, one evening in the middle of the month, a sudden warmth brought a feeling of enervation into the air, so that people lagged by the roadside, and showed a tendency to loiter even in the ugly byways that were not town or country.

A man tramping along in the dusty highway that led from Wimbledon shifted his load of artists' paraphernalia, and pushed the old cap back from his lined, dark eyes. He was not a young man, and he had been tramping in a desultory fashion from Surrey towards the City of London — the real City, that lay beyond Balham and Brixton, to which his face was set. The children whom he passed turned to stare at him and his pack, but as much from an excuse to idle as from any interest; for he was by no means an artistic or romantic figure, despite his profession — a tall, spare man, with a face that was evil despite its refinement, and sinister because of the effects of dissipation and

self-indulgence. He had lived for forty years in the world, and few of them had been harmless, either for himself or others; but because he had not grown fat, or wore a beard, people sometimes mistook him for thirty-five. There were times, on the other hand, when he looked fifty.

He had passed through Merton, with its glimpses of a ruined Abbey — which he had noted and condemned as a useless subject — and had reached Wandlebridge, that strip of straggling cottages and a muddy stream flanked by allotment grounds. The Wandle trickled along one side of the road with hardly the claim to be called anything more than a ditch, and on the other side were small buildings of red brick with strips of garden in front, and dingy signposts to the effect that this person was an undertaker or that took in washing. It was all infinitely sordid and depressing. Even the quiet evening was defiled by the raucous sound of London voices raised in timely gossip, and the lean man with the ugly face made a wry mouth as he strode onwards, his dusty shoes showing signs of wear and tear that suggested a weary journey.

He had no intention of staying in Wandlebridge, his next goal being the Pool of London; but the folding easel rasped his shoulder, so that he turned aside for a minute to alter the burden, and in a narrow lane at right angles to the highroad he slipped the whole pack to the ground and stood up at his full height for a moment, to stretch his many inches. Then, before he loaded himself again, he turned round and looked up the lane towards a gentler prospect of more open country.

The cottages here stopped abruptly beyond the row

fronting the highroad, and behind the one at the corner was something he could not have seen if he had not turned into the lane — an apple-tree in full blossom. The long rays of the sinking sun shone full upon the rosy boughs and green tufts of leaves, and the tired man gave a little sigh of pleasure at the perfect thing. He left his pack in the middle of the lane in a way which was characteristic had anyone been there who knew him, and walking up to the paling which guarded the cottage, looked more closely at the tree. It stood in a small space of grass, too small to be called a field, where some chickens were wandering in search of food, and beyond was the gradual slope of an allotment ground, blurred to general greenness by the evening light. But as he approached the tree he was aware of something besides the wealth of blossom — two legs in thick stockings much wrinkled about the ankles and a pair of shabby brown shoes. They were a girl's legs, though the short skirts were not even visible, but a minute later the branches were parted to satisfy the curiosity of the owner of the legs, and a face appeared framed in the apple blossoms.

It was the face of a little girl of about thirteen or fourteen years old — a face that had lost no curve of childhood and was rather round save for the beautiful moulding of the lower jaw, the line of which ran almost straight from the lobe of the ear to the decided chin. The features were small and well cut and the lips red and inclined to pout. But it was the general effect of ideal health and youth which was so arresting among the bonny apple blossoms,— the bloom of sunburnt cheeks, the gloss of the golden-brown hair curl-

ing thickly round the whole face, the deep, dewy eyes beneath long lashes and daintily drawn brows. There was hardly any character in the face as yet, and absolutely no experience to make it interesting. It was just beautiful, and an ideal type of Youth.

The man in the road and the girl in the tree stared at each other for a few seconds in absolute silence. Then the face was withdrawn amongst the apple blossom, there was a scramble, and something tumbled on to the soft grass and ran into the back of the house. He could see the outline of her figure as she ran, and it was that of a neatly made child clumsily dressed in a coarse stuff frock and white pinafore.

The artist turned back to the lane and picked up his pack, which he slung on to his shoulders again. The lines about his eyes had deepened, and he was smiling, so that he looked devilish rather than ingratiating. But the sunset was behind him as he walked round to the front of the cottage and knocked at the door, and the person who opened it could only see a tall man silhouetted against the sky.

"I beg your pardon for troubling you," said the artist in a voice that was unexpectedly charming. "But I wonder if you could advise me where I might get a room hereabouts for a few days? I want to make a sketch of — of Merton Abbey. I am not a very tiresome lodger, for I only want a bed, and I get my meals out anywhere."

The person who had answered the door to his knock was a large stout woman in a respectable cotton gown and apron, although her sleeves were rolled back to the elbow and it was evident from the smell of

steam and soap that she had been washing. She had once probably been good-looking, but there was nothing now in her hard-featured face at all resembling the vision in the apple-tree. There had been something uncompromising in her attitude when she first opened the door, but at the sound of the visitor's voice an intangible change came over her. One felt that she had been about to speak as to an equal — possibly an intrusive inferior — and that now she was going to add "sir."

"Will you come inside, sir?" was what she actually said, with a reserved civility that seemed to preserve her self-respect very carefully. "I'm doing some washing, and my hands are wet." It was noticeable that though she did not misplace her *h*'s or make any mistakes in English, her accent contrived to be that of the lower classes. The tired, dusty man followed her into a sitting-room with horsehair-covered furniture and a round table on which were several "gift" books in the centre. But in the window (which was mercifully open) stood a giant aspidistra, a really magnificent plant, the girth of whose pot alone was considerably over a yard.

"What a splendid fellow!" said the artist at once, walking over to the plant with a kind of brotherly good-fellowship. His voice was the voice for which lovers have pined in all ages, making the lightest word a caress and the most trivial phrase holy. A bishop or an actor would have found a fortune in such a voice. Taken in conjunction with his face it was a hideous irony.

It was evident, however, that his instinct for tact

was equal to the dulcet notes of his voice. The woman's face lost a little of its reserve and almost brightened.

"I've had that plant four year," she said, wiping her wet hands on her useful linen apron and sitting down on one of the hard slippery chairs. "Sit down sir, you look tired. Yes, many's the people come in here just to look at it nearer, seeing it stand in the window there. I never had no trouble with it. Just watered it myself and cut the dead leaves. It do grow beautiful."

"It is such a wonderful size!" said the artist simply, letting his pack fall once more from his shoulders. "I'm not fit to come into your sitting-room, I'm so covered with dust. I've walked from Reigate to-day. Will my traps hurt the carpet?" He looked down at it as if considering its egregious red cabbages on a black ground, with a border of false oilcloth where it did not reach to the wainscot. But his hostess saw only his outward politeness.

"That's nothing — don't you think about it. My girl will sweep it over. I'm thinking of your getting a room, sir. Mrs. Higgins used to let to a young man about Christmas time, and I think he's left. You might have his room."

"Is Mrs. Higgins a neighbour of yours?"

Somehow his delightful voice conveyed a distinct and flattering impression that he did not wish to be far away from this his first friend — and the aspidistra. He was very tired and shabby, and it was extremely unlikely that Mrs. Higgins or anyone else would make much out of him; but the woman knew that he was a gentleman, and also that she was going to make him

what was really a generous offer. Her real reason for this was because he had reached and played upon the softer side of her nature with a touch as delicate and unerring as any specialist in emotions; but that she did not know.

"Look here, sir, there's my brother Tom's room — you're welcome to that if you don't mind a sloping roof. I don't think Mrs. Higgins would suit you, and I know my *own* things are clean."

"I like a sloping roof!" said the artist, smiling very gently, for he knew that he was apt to destroy the impression of his voice when he smiled. It had all the gigantic cynicism of the king of hell.

"It's not a hot room," said the woman, rising with a certain slowness that suggested rheumatism. "It faces north, but it's right up in the roof."

"I want a north aspect of all things!" said the artist almost breathlessly. "But you said the room was your brother's — ?"

"It was, sir — he's dead!" The woman stopped with startling suddenness on her way to the door, and turned round to plunge into reminiscence. "He came to me at Christmas — to spend it all together like — and his wife, my sister-in-law, had written to say he was very ill, but I saw the minute he come in at that gate that he was done! And he so cheerful and hopeful too. 'It's all right, Mary,' he says; 'I'll be better in a few days and amongst you all,' just as his wife was helping him up to bed. 'Tom,' I says; 'don't deceive yourself, my boy. *You'll* never come down again out of this house but feet first!' That was before Christmas, and he was buried on Boxing Day."

The artist's mouth twitched, and it seemed as if his tact failed him for a minute. Something in this Christmas greeting to the unfortunate invalid seemed to appeal to his sense of humour. But his hostess did not wait for a reply.

"And there's his room all ready, sir, left just as he had it, and you're welcome to it for half-a-crown a week. You can go up and see it now, if you like, but if you'll excuse me I won't show you myself, for the stairs are bad for me. My girl will take you up — Beau-ty! Beau-ty!"

"Wait a minute," said the artist, as she turned towards the regions whence the smell of washing still issued. "Of course you must not climb those steep stairs — but would you tell me your name? Mine is Trevor Guy."

"Mrs. Darling," said the woman with the same unconscious dignity. "I'll send my girl — or else the laundry help. Beau-ty! Beau-ty!"

She walked down the passage in the same deliberate, ponderous fashion, leaving Trevor Guy waiting at the foot of the narrow staircase. He had time to reflect that Mrs. Darling had the build of a person who would die of apoplexy if not careful of her health, before a new figure appeared from the regions into which she had vanished — new, and yet not new to Trevor, for it was the girl who had been sitting in the apple-tree.

She did not come very willingly, and after her first quick glance of recognition she did not appear very interested. When he stood near to her Guy saw that she was of a very different type to Mrs. Darling physically, whatever likeness there might be mentally.

The father — if this were Mrs. Darling's daughter, and she looked too young a child for the heavy work of the laundry, to be the "help" — must have been small-boned and delicately turned, for even her hands, though reddened and roughened, belonged to a different breed to Mrs. Darling's. Her marvellous prettiness had not owed anything to the glamour of the apple blossom and the sunset. She was just as much the personification of Youth as she ran up the stairs in front of him as she had been leaning from the branches. "Nevertheless, I will paint her in the apple-tree, exactly as I first saw her," said Trevor Guy to himself as he followed her.

The room was literally, as Mrs. Darling had said, under the roof. The back portion of the cottage had been an older building, and the new and ugly frontage had been built on to match its neighbours. But being the corner house it ran back into the lane, and from the first floor a second and very irregular flight of steps led into that chamber from which poor Tom was only destined to descend "feet first." Guy's observant eyes took in the details of the place with the training of his profession and with some satisfaction. It was furnished as only the lower middle class do furnish, with a mixture of extreme penury and show; but though the low pallet bed looked very hard, the coverlet was quite clean, and if the furniture was gimcrack there was mercifully little of it. The window in the gable of the roof faced due north, as Mrs. Darling had promised, and the room was large if low.

"Who else sleeps on this side of the house?" he asked, turning to the indifferent figure of the girl waiting at the door.

"No one!" was the answer, delivered in a very shy voice.

"Is there any other room?"

"Yes, but mother only uses it for storing things in it. Aunt Carrie did sleep there in the winter when Uncle Tom was so ill, but there's no one there now."

"Oh!" He turned a little more towards her and smiled that careful smile. "And are you Mrs. Darling's daughter?"

"Yes."

"And what is your name?"

"Beauty!" she answered after more hesitation. It was not the claim of the appellation that made her tongue-tied, or its undoubted and pointed application to herself; but something in the gentleman himself made her uncomfortable. He did not interest her, for he was so elderly in her eyes as to be almost beyond the sphere of sex—"a young man" to Beauty Darling being strictly within the age limits of seventeen to twenty-six—and he was neither well-dressed nor good-looking. And yet she felt the same alien atmosphere that had made Mrs. Darling call him "sir," and it weighed upon her in conjunction with that deeply sweet voice that was so bewildering to all those who first heard it. It was a relief to her when she made good her escape to the kitchen again, though the irksome task of ironing the finer articles of apparel awaited her there.

Trevor Guy took the room. He had slept in many worse places, and it was as cheap as anything he was likely to get in London on this side of the water. He was little trouble as a lodger, as he had promised, for he got his meals at the nearest public-house when he

did not eat bread and cheese at his easel, and he really did make a sketch of Merton Abbey and sent it to an art shop in Westminster which occasionally sold his drawings on commission, and to his own surprise got fifteen shillings for it the first week it appeared in the window. This was a fluke, and was probably the result of some sentimental association with Merton on the part of the buyer; but it ensured his rent for a few weeks to come, and he stayed on in Mrs. Darling's cottage for the real purpose for which he had gone there — to paint a picture of the girl in the apple-tree.

He was far too subtle to betray his intention all at once, and he knew with the fine sense that had been both his success and his disaster all his life that if he had suggested painting her daughter to Mrs. Darling she would have taken fright and made up her mind once for all that it was undesirable. He made studies of the fleeting apple blossom while it still clung to the tree, and sat out day after day in the little back garden among the chickens, where Beauty might be seen coming and going on various errands and duties when she was not at school. She attended a school in Wandlebridge rather above the Board Schools of ten years ago — an old Foundation whose pupils paid some five pounds a year for the privilege of being taught to spell decently and write an educated hand, and it was due to her training there that her accent and English were better than Mrs. Darling's, though, like all girls of her class, she had two manners and two languages — one that she put on in the vestibule of the school when she arrived there and took off when she left, and the other that she assumed in her own home.

Remnants of the school language and manner resumed themselves instinctively in her brief relations with Guy, and that was how he came to comprehend the dual personality.

He had been nearly a week in Mrs. Darling's cottage before he said to her casually, "I want a figure in my picture of your apple-tree. I will give your little girl a shilling if she will climb into the tree and sit there for me to paint."

Mrs. Darling shut her lips. A desire to accommodate her lodger was evidently being balanced by some private objection to the proposal.

"Well, I'd rather she did not, sir," she said unwillingly. "It's very kind of you, I'm sure, and I don't mind about giving her anything for doing it." (She had generously saved the artist small expenses when possible, which consideration for his means caused him that wry smile again when forced upon his notice. It was the only time when he thought of his own family and their traditions with any tolerance.) "But I don't want her to think she's worth making a picture of — she's vain enough as things are, and always getting her head full of dressing up and finery and all."

"But I only want her as a figure study," said Guy with an easy laugh. "I'm not painting her portrait. I don't think she could find it very flattering to be made use of like that; she will probably think it a great nuisance, and want to run off and play with her schoolfellows. How old is she?"

"Beauty is fourteen."

"Is she really! She looks about eleven," he said with well-feigned surprise, for he had guessed the

girl's age correctly, small though she was. "She must be getting useful to you in the house."

"She might be if she would, but she hates work; she isn't even one of the clever ones at school. I'd have made her a teacher if she had been that way, but she'll have to go into a shop, or service."

"Children are a disappointment, aren't they, Mrs. Darling?"

"They are, sir. I'm almost thankful sometimes as all mine died young."

"*All* your children?" He turned quickly with some real surprise in his dark eyes this time, and they half closed as they did when he was considering a "subject."

"Yes, sir; Beauty's not one of *my* daughters, though she's called so for charity's sake. She's a come-by-chance."

"Ah!" The sweet voice was very low and sympathetic, and wooed Mrs. Darling into confidences even by the one word. He did not even smile at the quaint phrase for illegitimacy.

"She was just truly left on the doorstep; we were living in Bloomsbury then," said Mrs. Darling with some secret enjoyment of the story. "I'd not lost my husband six months, and the children was all dead. And there was this poor small thing lying there in a shawl; I tell you, sir, she was one of the smallest babies I have ever seen, not weighing more than nine pounds, and *my* children had weighed that when they was just born! But there it was, and she was eight or ten months old, the doctor thought. Not a sign to trace her by! The shawl was a cheap thing, bought new for the purpose, and it was a poor neighbourhood.

Some unfortunate creature must have left her there and said good riddance!"

"And you took her in? You are a good woman, Mrs. Darling!" There was just the necessary enthusiasm and emotion in his tones to continue the story, but he did not mean to tell the plain truth. Truth, plain or otherwise, did not appeal to Trevor Guy.

"What else could I do, sir?" Mrs. Darling in her turn was a thought dramatic, enjoying the situation. "I'd none of my own left, and a pair of hands to work for us both. Yes, I took her and brought her up. But there's none of me in her — she would never have pulled through the hard time we had if she'd been in my place."

"What made you call her Beauty? Is it her real name?"

"I had her christened that, yes. Well, you see, she was such a little beauty, though so small, or I thought so at the time. And her teacher at school says she's well named still, though she thinks it was a pity to call her so."

"But I'm sure she's a good girl with your training!" He was slightly curious on this point. Beauty's history, poor child! had made her doubly artistic in his eyes.

"Good enough, while my eye is on her. You can't make a silk purse from a sow's ear. She must have come of a bad stock. Decent women don't leave their babies on doorsteps to the mercy of other people!"

"Are you a Calvinist, Mrs. Darling? Do you think she is doomed from the beginning?" Even his voice was not attractive when he laughed like that.

"Mrs. Smith at No. 10 calls herself a Calvinist," said Mrs. Darling, waiving the imputation. "No, I don't hold with such things myself. Not that I'd do away with hell — especially for men. It takes such a lot of damnation held over them to keep them straight!"

Guy's laugh was checked this time by the appearance of Beauty herself, coming into the room with a parcel of clean linen to be taken home. She must have heard her foster-mother's final sentence, but she was probably used to such sentiments, for her round, childish face did not alter at all. She was going to retreat with her burden, as she generally did out of the artist's presence, when he caught her by the arm.

"Here, little one, I've been asking your mother if you may climb into the apple-tree to put some life into my picture for me," he said carelessly. "I want a figure to paint. It needn't interfere with her lessons, Mrs. Darling — hasn't she a half holiday on Saturday?"

Taken by storm like this, Mrs. Darling found herself somehow in the position of having already given her consent, but she made the situation as little attractive as possible by telling Beauty to "make herself useful" as she could to Mr. Guy, and warning her that she must keep very still and not fidget as she did in class or at church. The girl was really not at all anxious to waste her holiday in such tedious recreation, and Mrs. Darling's scruples were further lulled to rest by her foster-child's uncomplimentary criticism on the "loony old dauber" who wanted her to stick up in a tree like a silly monkey for his rotten picture!

(It must be borne in mind that Beauty was cross at missing the chance of a ride on another girl's bicycle that particular afternoon.)

Something of her disaffection was plainly visible on the child's face as she sulkily took up her position in the tree, her feet dangling ludicrously, every angle of her body a witness to ill-temper. The straight delicate brows were half an inch lower than usual above the dark blue eyes that stared straight over the artist's head to a distant prospect of cabbages and potatoes on the allotment ground. He looked at the cross little face deliberately, and then he rose and sauntered leisurely up to the tree where she sat.

For a minute or two he stood and studied her out of his narrowed dark eyes. Beauty shrank instinctively from the sudden nearness of his face thrust closer to her among the quivering apple blossoms, and thought anew how ugly he was, with a very natural indignation. Had he been a young man, or more attractive, there would have been some consolation in this posing for her picture. But somehow the thin, battered face, so full of lines that wrote a story of a life she could not read, made her feel that she was only a very small accessory — a figure to give life to his picture. There was nothing more flattering to be hoped from the situation than that. His hair was much greyer, too, in the betraying sunlight than she had even thought, and the large rusty moustache that hid his mouth was neither trimmed nor waxed. Beauty wriggled in the gnarled old boughs, bringing down a shower of petals from the passing flowers, and wished that he would go away.

Suddenly he began to speak in a voice that lost none

of its music for the ripple of laughter through the words.

"How naughty to shake all the blossom down and spoil the picture! Is she a very cross baby, and didn't she want to sit in a nasty old tree and waste her holiday? Poor Beauty! What a shame!"

He took hold of her by her elbows as he spoke, and moved her into a more favourable position. The girl's muscles relaxed under the sound of his voice, and she unconsciously fell more into the pose he wanted. His hands still touched her, however, pulling her frock here and there and arranging her thick soft hair. There was something very practised in those hands, though they were knotted and heavily veined. Suddenly the girl perceived that she was being coaxed, and a little dimple showed at the corner of her red mouth, while her brows went back into their rightful place. He was elderly and plain to her physical vision, but his hands told her that he was a man.

"It seems so silly, Mr. Guy!"

"Wait till you see what I make of you. There, that's better. I'm only going to get the outlines to-day, and the play of light on the apple blossom — I mustn't lose the apple blossom, it falls so quickly. Don't move for a few minutes, there's a good child."

He did not really keep her very long, partly because he did not want her attitude to get strained, partly because he had got all he could get out of that first sitting. Beauty's dark skirt would not do — he would make her wear white next time; and her brown shoes and stockings would not do at all, but he did not suggest the little bare feet and legs he wanted, on this occasion. Trevor Guy went softly, with the panther's

tread, and lured his prey into the trap long before he made his spring. When the first sitting was over he went up to the apple-tree again and leaned his arms on the girl's lap, looking closely into her face as if to study her.

"There, that's all I want of you at present. Not so very bad, was it?"

"Is it done? May I see it?" she said naïvely. "It's almost as quick as a photograph!"

"There is nothing to see — nothing that you could see, anyway. I've got it all here!" He touched his forehead and smiled at her a little, never moving his eyes from her face.

"Oh!" said Beauty, rather disappointed. "I thought you couldn't have done much."

"I shall do more to-morrow."

"I can't come to-morrow — mother wouldn't let me sit up here on Sunday!"

"I don't want you. I am going to put in some work without a model. But if you can give me half an hour on Monday after you get home from school, I'll show you what it's going to be like when it's finished."

"Yes, I dare say I could get off early Monday."

He did not speak for a minute, but stood where he was, looking steadily into her face. Beauty liked the feeling of his arms resting on her without knowing why. Her sensations with regard to the opposite sex were at present limited to walking arm-in-arm with a young man from the grocer's shop and being kissed by a younger boy in the dark one night coming back from some small festivity. Neither of these incidents had affected her beyond a flattered sense of her own attrac-

tions. That the attraction could come from the man was suddenly revealed to her with the thrill of a new experience.

"I am going to lift you down, or you will lose me some more apple blossom," said Trevor Guy quietly. His expressive hands closed on her waist and knees and talked namelessly to her as he swung her out of the branches. The movement was so deft that hardly a petal was shaken down, but Beauty closed her eyes for a second for the stolen pleasure of a new sense, and let her head drop gently back against his shoulder. Guy was wearing an old suit of heather tweed, and the faint musky scent that hangs about that material was woven into all Beauty's after memories of the moment. For it was the indefinite subtlety of her own emotions that she enjoyed, and nothing more tangible. If he had kissed her she would have been rather disgusted and a little guilty, for though there was no reason why he should not lift her down from the apple-tree to save shaking the blossom, there was the hackneyed danger of a kiss, and mother would have been angry suppose she had witnessed it from the back-door. But Guy did nothing of the sort. He held her quite still against him for a moment, letting her feel the reality of his arms, and then set her lightly on the ground.

"I want you to wear a white skirt next time," he said quietly. "This is too dark."

Beauty did not answer. She turned and ran away into the house. And then for the first time the man let his smile have full play.

There were no palliating circumstances about Trevor Guy. He came of a good family who had gradu-

ally ceased to hold any communication with him on account of the life that he led, and the breach was maintained with bitterness on both sides, but with more reason on theirs. From the ateliers of Paris to the slums of Soho there was no phase of Bohemian life that Trevor had not tried, and from which he had not emerged a trifle more wearied and vicious. He possessed that licence for self-indulgence called a "temperament" by its owners, and a palate that had become deadened with full flavours. If he had worked he might have kept his head above water; but his inspirations were erratic, and his productions so uneven that he spoiled his own market. Sometimes by a stroke of luck he had money, but more often he lived from hand to mouth; and he knew the degradation of doss-houses, and had made clever sketches of gaol — from the inside. It was due to the chance sale of his sketch of Merton Abbey that he did not leave Mrs. Darling's cottage with the rent unpaid; not that he meant to cheat her, but that if he had not the money he did not pay — that was all. On the whole he was glad to be able to fulfil his obligations, for he rather liked Mary Darling. Her stanch self-respect and her philosophical acceptance of life as a disadvantageous thing struck him as intensely humorous — the more so as she was quite without that quality in herself. He liked talking to her, and would wander into the kitchen after the light failed him for painting, and sit on the edge of the table to discuss politics or religion or illness with her, while she wrung out her linen or cooked the supper. Illness was her special subject. Like all her class, she revelled in descriptions of disease, and spared him no details of any case

that had come within her personal experience. Guy would hug himself in his long arms and rock with silent laughter while she repeated the blunt truths she had told her relations about their mortal bodies, or moralised on the ailments to which they were liable.

"I'm stronger since I had my children," she wound up on one occasion. "I often think it's very hard on ladies in your position, sir. If they don't happen to marry they're sure to suffer for want of it — it's nature!"

Trevor Guy's dark eyes narrowed to two slits, and the wrinkles in his face made him rather diabolic in his amusement. "Yes, it's nature!" he said in that delightful voice that seemed to excuse so much, both in himself and others. "And who can blame them?"

Mrs. Darling did not answer, but she pursed her lips. It seemed probable that she did blame humanity for the rights of nature, even while acknowledging them. Guy wondered if she often moralised in the same strain to her foster-daughter. . . .

Beauty wore the white skirt the next time she sat for him in the apple-tree, and this time she did not pout or sulk. Indeed, she was docilely ready to take whatever pose he wished, and to stay away from such distractions as were offered by the school recreation-ground. He knew perfectly well that she was half disturbed and half-looking forward to the moment when he should touch her, or lift her from the tree, with each restless movement that she made during the sitting, and it amused him to torture her. His mere presence was a kind of irritation, though she did not understand it. The man's mind was like an evil odour; it im-

pregnated the air before normally healthy people were aware of it, and then they shrank from the poison.

Trevor Guy liked the sensation that Beauty gave him in his turn, without deliberately trying to do her any harm. His emotions were so jaded that it required something as new and unshadowed as the child-beauty of her face to stimulate them, but he really possessed that gift of imagination that can enjoy as much by sight as by touch. Her story interested him too, as a possible development of unknown tendencies and inheritance, and Mrs. Darling's blunt assertion that you could not make a silk purse out of a sow's ear confirmed the vague feeling that a baby left on a doorstep was predestined to evil. Poor little "come-by-chance!" the froth tossed up by unbridled passion! Men like Trevor Guy think by habit to evil ends. But he planned no seduction; it was neither worth while nor feasible in such guardianship as Mary Darling's. She was strict with her girl, for when the poor are respectable they are far more so than any other class, more rigid in their views, and more unforgiving. Trevor Guy was not a man who made his opportunities; but he waited for them. In due course he had asked Mrs. Darling if her little girl might clean his palette — he would show her how — and the woman promptly consented, as he expected. The more tasks he exacted from Beauty, the better she was satisfied. She called the girl pleasure-loving and idle, and industry was one of her own virtues. Beauty learned to scrape palettes and to do other odd jobs that took her in and out of the painter's room, even while he was at work, and he worked there at times because of the "north light."

Then there came a wet day when Beauty returned early from school, there being no games to detain her, and Mrs. Darling had gone to see a neighbour. Guy suggested to the girl that she should give him a sitting indoors, up in his attic, and posed her on an improvised pile of boxes and a chair, leaving the door of the room wide open to the public should anyone choose to see. It was very still in the house, for the laundry-help was at her work in the scullery far below, and only the patter of the rain broke the oppressive silence. Guy stood at his easel working hard at the picture, which even to his model's eyes was assuming a definite reflection of the apple-tree and the blue sky and her own fairness; Beauty sat on her precarious seat, and her whole body tingled with apprehension. He had hardly touched her since the first sitting, and had denied her the subtle enjoyment of the feeling in his hands. Guy knew the power that lay in his long vigorous fingers as well as any woman who had learned their peculiar language. They spoke for him when words became unwarrantable.

As he worked he began to sing, a low crooning song that was at first hardly more than a murmur, and mingled pleasantly with the rain. But after a time the notes became louder and firmer, and though she did not know it, Beauty was treated to a musical feast that was not granted to very many. Guy's voice was not powerful enough to fill even a fair-sized concert hall — for which reason he had never turned it to account — but of its kind it was as nearly divine as a human gift can be, and that he was so very far removed from all divinity could not alter its quality. He was singing the "Songs of Araby," and Beauty

listened, only half taking in the words but drifting with the sweetness of the melody: —

"To cheat thee of a sigh —
Or charm thee to a tear!"

Guy took the high note like an artist, and, a little stirred by his own achievement, laid down his brush.

"You may rest now," he said quietly, and the music seemed to run on in the words. "You are getting stiff, and the attitude is no good to me. Go to the window and see if it is still raining. The light seems to be getting worse."

Beauty dropped down from her perch, and walked across to the window on the further side of the room mechanically. She had to pass the easel to do so, and unknown to herself drew away from him as from something to be avoided. The painter saw and smiled a little dangerously, as a wild beast might bare its gums if flicked with a whip.

"It's still raining," said Beauty at the window, looking down into the narrow lane where Guy had first turned aside from the highroad and seen her. "Mother will get wet if she —"

The sentence broke off short. Guy had come up behind her noiselessly. He was accustomed to stand behind his victims where they could not see his face, and where he could use his voice and hands. He was again humming the final lines of his song: —

"And all my song shall strive to wake
Sweet wonder in thine eyes!"—

and his fingers spoke to Beauty's inner consciousness as they rested on her shoulders.

"Don't cry out!" he warned her. Then he lifted her chin and, holding her in a vice, kissed her roughly — that unconscious shrinking from him as she passed the easel had enraged him, so that he wanted to punish her more than to please himself. The ragged moustache against her smooth face made her wince, and his cruel lips bruised her own; but there was no evading or denying his purpose, and she had her first lesson whether she would or no.

"You must pay for being Beauty Darling," he told her coarsely, before he let her go. "Pay, and pay, and pay again! There is no escape from men for such as you."

And Beauty stumbled out of the room, half crying, as if a curse had indeed been pronounced upon her.

CHAPTER II

MRS. DARLING was a person of property as contrasted with her neighbours, for she had a small annuity besides the laundry work. This had been secured to her by an uncle in the greengrocery trade who had made a little money, and, distrusting the capacity of woman as regards investment, had had the forethought to arrange that Mary Darling should have a competence for her lifetime at least. Her husband and children being all dead, it was really a reasonable project for the widow; but she had nothing to leave, which aggravated her relations, no matter what might be their own monetary position. Of Mary Darling's foster-daughter and her future nobody took much account — not even the woman herself, who, with the philosophy of her kind, supposed that Beauty would "do" somehow after her death. She had at least brought the girl up in decency and self-respect according to her own methods, and intended to further equip her for the battle of life by putting her into trade or service of some sort when she left school.

Mrs. Darling undertook the laundry work to render herself a little more independent, and because (though she did not recognize this fact) work of some sort was a necessity to her. It was her inherited instinct, and she bitterly resented the fact that it did not appear to be Beauty's. Mrs. Darling's washing was an irregular thing, only undertaken for certain old ladies

who still lived in that dilapidated neighbourhood and could afford to pay for their fine linen being properly washed and got up by hand. With the thoroughness of her nature, Mrs. Darling was an artist at her washing-tub and ironing-table, and saw to it that Beauty did her portion of the work thoroughly also. She charged heavy prices compared to the big steam laundries of the South of London, or even those of her neighbours who undertook a " few families," and made up for their reasonable charges by what they lost or stole; but Mary Darling's goffering and pressing was of a kind that deserves payment.

Beauty would have preferred her foster-mother to give up the laundry and take to needlework if she must augment her tiny income, even though it meant doing without some of the necessities of their narrow life. The girl was idle, in Mrs. Darling's phrase, in so far as she disliked the physical toil and aching back that went with the ironing, but she really did not mind needlework, and would have dawdled and fussed over anything pretty that it fell to her lot to make. Furthermore, the laundry was a trifle humiliating. At school Beauty found herself amongst the daughters of small tradesmen, clerks, men employed in any respectable position, and whose income was sufficiently assured to allow them to pay the nominal fees of the old Foundation. Such institutions have been mostly done away with now that the County Council's revolutionary proceedings have brought Secondary Schools within the reach of the lower middle class; but during the days of Beauty Darling's educational period to pay even a small sum gave the scholar a superior position to that of the Board School, and it was due to Mrs.

Darling's sense of self-respect that the girl was associated with those rather above her in station instead of the children of labouring men. It was not pleasant, however, to be met by Bertha or Violet carrying home a parcel of fine linen whose shape and size was undisguisable. Snobbishness is just as painful in detail as in bulk, and the lady who pays a duchess for introductions into a higher sphere than her own suffers no keener humiliations than poor Beauty on the upward way. She hated it being known that she helped Mrs. Darling with the washing when at home, and if she could possibly arrange for the laundry-help to carry home the clothes, she would; but Mrs. Darling's firm rule was seldom to be circumvented or avoided, and Beauty did as she was told.

The world of school was the only refining influence in Beauty's life, and was on the whole a disturbing and warring experience. If her schoolfellows were in a slightly better position, her teachers were of a grade still farther above her, and their example tended to teach the girls to speak correctly, and even encouraged them to think; but in their own homes these advantages were laughed at as "affectation," and as like as not mimicked by those who at the bottom of their hearts resented their own shortcomings. "My father and mother spoke good enough for me, and I ought to speak good enough for you" was the parents' attitude, and for very discomfort the girls gradually adopted those two manners and languages that belonged separately to the school and to their homes. The mistress at the head of the Wandlebridge School happened to be an exceptional woman, with the courage of a pioneer and the faith of an early Christian.

She believed in the mystery called Girl, and laboured with the earnestness of an enthusiast to develop the unpromising material passed through her hands. Furthermore, she was before her time, an educationist of the modern type, and — as far as might be with the traditions of her Foundation — she taught after the new method, which imparts knowledge so diffusedly that the subject hardly knows she is being taught and imbibes information whether she will or no, as she draws in the oxygen of the air. At fourteen Beauty Darling was probably as well grounded in modern geography, history, arithmetic, and general information, as many girls in the Secondary Schools of to-day; but she held her knowledge mechanically, as did many of her schoolmates, and it was caducous and would fall from her during her passage through the world, save as it might remain in her trained memory. Where such teaching falls upon fruitful soil it produces wonderful results, and the public is just beginning to congratulate itself upon the advance of education and the chances so eagerly snatched by all classes; but where the soil is not fruitful it is really no better than the old methods of forcing the three R's into a child's mind by sheer repetition. The head mistress of Wandlebridge School knew this as no one else could do, with patient despair. But she gave her girls their chances nevertheless, without bias or favour.

There were children younger than Beauty Darling in the same school who had ambitions to be teachers themselves, or developed a talent for some skilled work that would ensure them a future; but Beauty was not one of these by instinct or inclination. What could be done with such a girl? She was a docile and rather

likeable child, with a certain fastidiousness of habit —*soignée,* as the French say — and not over-conceited considering her looks. But she had neither the initiative, nor the desire to push herself to the front, that would discount disagreeable obstacles. She liked appreciation, but it must not be hard to win, and she liked prettiness, but had not even the mercantile brain that sees in it an asset.

"If Beauty Darling had been the daughter of rich people," said Beauty's schoolmistress shrewdly, "she would have done very well, and gone through life creditably if not brilliantly. She would have been put in a glass case, practically speaking, and kept there to be admired — which is plainly what the gods intended, since they made her to be looked at! But her very suitability for that sort of life will be her drawback in the working classes. What is one to do with such a girl? The best I can hope is that she will marry a decent tradesman while still too young to get into difficulties, and settle down to attracting customers to the shop and having pretty children!"

Beauty's own ambition, as Trevor Guy had already discovered, was to go on the stage. But it was not the stage where one showed one's legs for an advertisement of goods to sell, the possible advantages to be gained thereby not having been suggested to her. She had lived a guarded life, considering her position, and her friends had been drawn from decent working families. Beauty took her ambition rather seriously, and imagined herself in melodrama, a persecuted heroine in a white gown with her hair hanging down, and a villain hunting her round the stage until the clean-shaven hero married her in the last act. This idea was

drawn from the one or two occasions on which she had been to the theatre at Balham with a party of other girls, who had "Oh'd!" and "Ah'd!" with very youthful enjoyment during the progress of the play. She did not care about Musical Comedy — it was on a level with pantomime, and suitable for kids. Besides, it had no serious love interest. Guy drew all this from her with intense amusement during the sittings, and gave her bad advice which she disregarded, but which nevertheless sank into her mind and lay there dormant. He understood her in a manner better than anyone (her schoolmistress not excluded) had done in her little life, because he experimented on her temperament, made allowances for possible traits, and did indeed discover much that had lain hidden even from Beauty herself.

"When you really want to go on the stage, Beauty," he said, with a quiet acceptance of such a destiny for her that made her feel rather frightened, "you are to go to Edgar Allonby — do you hear? Edgar Allonby, of Allonby's Theatre. Don't forget the name. And don't dress yourself up. Go exactly as you are now."

Beauty was wearing the plain white shirt and dark skirt in which she went to school, where it was a rule that no girl should wear a blouse without a collar, cheap lace, or false beads. Of course many of the girls reverted to these forbidden glories in their own homes, but Mrs. Darling being set against "finery," Beauty was obliged to sigh in vain for the time when she might wear her hair puffed out to hideous excrescences, and tawdry apparel from the Balham Road shops. Her wide-brimmed sailor hat with the school ribbon

she would gladly have exchanged for a "creation" piled with cheap flowers and ribbons, and priced three and elevenpence-halfpenny. But in spite of a perverted taste she knew how to put on her clothes, and was half contented to wear her hair down. No other style could so well have suited the blooming child face as those rich thick curls that needed no Hinde's pins and fell loosely about her forehead and onto her neck. Beauty's hair never grew long, but it was thick and soft and full of life and colour, with a natural spring from her head where she parted it. Trevor Guy's suggestion that she should present herself to any theatrical manager as she looked at school, however, did not fall in at all with her preconceived notions, any more than that she should go to the man whose name was identified with the house where Musical Comedy reigned supreme.

"You don't know anything about it, Mr. Guy!" said Beauty with a toss of her curly head. "I shall ask Lucy Dale to help me when I really do mean to go!"

Lucy Dale was an older girl in the school, whose dramatic talent had been so undeniable that no opposition at home or dissuasion at school could keep her off the stage. But to tell the truth the head mistress had done little dissuasion beyond warning the pupil of the hard work ahead of her, for she believed in talent finding its bent, and Lucy was by no means the kind of girl who goes into the ranks of the chorus and remains there to make dubious history. Hard work could not frighten Lucy out of her profession. She was a born elocutionist, and content to work her way up to her ideal of Sheakespeare and learn by patient

drudgery. She had been two years in the provinces and suburbs of London now, and was beginning to be recognized in decent companies as at least hard-working and reliable. Beauty had liked the glamour of knowing that Lucy was "on the stage," and hearing of her progress up to speaking a line or so by great good luck when another girl was ill; but she would not at all have liked the monotony, discouragement, and real struggle that Lucy had undergone. Beauty Darling was an amateur in all things, and only the stress of life could make her a professional.

Trevor Guy made one of his wry faces at Lucy's name. He had heard all about her, and revolted from the practical training of her "going on the stage" with an antagonism that was inherent. Art to Guy was either a blaze of erratic genius, or a perfectly meretricious chance of luck. He had never worked, himself, and his cynicism led him to believe that easier results might be obtained by fooling the public than by competing honestly for its favour. His picture of Beauty Darling was to be a very good instance of this, though his talent (and he had, unfortunately, a very decided talent) raised it from the merely pretty into a promise of something much better. There was the breath of Spring in his apple blossom, and all the possibilities of youth in the figure of Beauty and her exquisite face. But he meant to make of it merely a "pretty picture" to catch the public eye, and perhaps gain him a vogue in the production of such coloured "pot-boilers." He trusted to the real beauty of the child's face and the pleasant impression left by the symbol of "Spring" on people's minds, to earn him his ill-gotten gains, and snapped his fingers at the possibility of a

hint of inspiration in his work having as much to do with his success as a charming subject.

"Don't be a little fool, Beauty!" he advised her scoffingly. "You are not Lucy Dale, even if she has gained one inch of the way by hard work where you might gain a yard by looking pretty. Your face is your fortune, Beauty — you don't want to trouble about your brains."

He walked across the room, and turned the face he praised a little more to the light, altering her pose by a finger under her round chin. The girl instinctively raised her face for the magnetic touch, and her eyes grew dreamy with the dazed look of an animal that is caressed. Then she shrank a little, afraid that he was going to kiss her — but he seldom did that. She could never bear his kisses, though now and then he made her endure them, as much for the pleasure of doing something she did not like as from any desire on his own part. The power he exercised over Beauty was like an unclean fascination, a thing that made her half sick to contemplate and half drugged to experience. She longed for the touch of his hands, young as she was, but the mere look of him — gaunt, and dissipated, and middle-aged — revolted her. Perhaps it was a form of hypnotism, since she never breathed a word either to Mrs. Darling or her schoolmistress, or indeed her own friends, of what went on between her and Trevor Guy. She half dreaded and half longed for the time when he should go away, and the nearing completion of the picture made her breathe more freely. After all he had done her no harm that she could realize, and when he was gone there would be no necessity to betray herself to anybody.

The end came rather suddenly, and was an impulse, unexpected by either of them. It was hastened by a letter to Guy, who rarely received letters, informing him of the death of his father, and the division of property which would secure him a moderate but certain income. Guy had been so long without "visible means of subsistence" that the idea of a certain respectability forced upon him was almost irksome. Yet it might be a relief in a few years, for he was not growing any younger, and the money being in the hands of trustees it was nearly as safely doled out to him as Mrs. Darling's annuity was to her. The letter also contained a small sum of money in advance, owing to the family's experience of Trevor's probable monetary condition. He did not read the daily papers, and had known nothing of his father's lingering illness, and though the older man was over seventy, his graceless son had hardly expected to outlive him. He was neither particularly sorry nor glad at the demise, all family ties and affections having been broken long since — so much so, indeed, that the news would have taken much longer to reach him save for the agency of the very picture-dealer who had sold the sketch of Merton on commission, and through whom he sometimes kept in touch with the outer world.

Trevor pocketed the money, and said nothing about it to Mrs. Darling, to whom he paid his half-crown rent and said goodbye, leaving her not unrelieved at his departure, for her sister-in-law — that very wife who had accompanied poor Tom at Christmas — had unexpectedly come to spend a few days with her, and had been bundled into the room where "mother only stored things," in an improvised bed. Mrs. Darling's

hospitality was outraged, and she would be glad to put her visitor into Guy's room as soon as he was gone. He did not realize, however, that the storeroom occupied by Aunt Carrie was next door to his own and that the partition was thin.

There had been nothing to hear up to that last night, that was the irony of it, and Mrs. Emery might have listened all the hours of darkness if she had liked with no harm to anybody. But that night a door creaked, and there was a stealthy step, and then, once or twice, voices.

. . . . . .

Trevor Guy left early the next morning, for he wished to avoid the heat. The year had rounded into summer, and the middle of the day was more like July than May. He paid his rent and shook hands with Mrs. Darling, departing as he came with his pack on his shoulders. His sudden accession to comparative fortune had had no visible effect upon him, but he had given Beauty a sovereign and told her bluntly to keep it: she did not know when she might want money. The girl took it in a dazed fashion, and looked at him with the eyes of some inconsiderable animal already doomed to the wolf's maw. But she slipped away from him as soon as possible — he had only called her to the door of his room — and Guy went down the narrow staircase for the last time to make his farewell to his landlady.

She was cooking the breakfast and offered him some before his start, but he smiled his restrained smile and shook his head. He preferred to get a cup of coffee at a stall on his way.

"I learned that habit in Paris," he said, and his voice

was none the less smooth for any deed of the night. "Coffee and a roll are a good breakfast for a poor man, and cost less than tea and bacon!"

"Yes, it's hard on gentlemen like your sort," agreed Mrs. Darling, with the frank criticism of her kind. "Not in steady work or able to put anything by, I dare say, sir!"

"Oh, well, there's always the Union for us, Mrs. Darling! The Guardians have a mission to look after such vagabonds as myself!"

Mrs. Darling pursed up her lips. "I don't say but the Board does its best," she said kindly, "but if they saw all *I've* seen along of the Poor Law they'd smile the other side of their mouths! There's the Relief Funds after the war, too, going to all sorts of persons because they had a son or so killed. My mother-in-law, sir, that was content to live at home with her married daughter and help with the children, she's gone and married an old man on their two 'compensations' money. And he's eighty and she seventy-two!" [1]

"It does sound as if they had been tempted into recklessness. But perhaps the War Office hasn't a mother-in-law! Are your sympathies with the Opposition, Mrs. Darling?"

"Not particularly, sir. They're all much of a muchness. I don't care which side is in — it's what they get done that touches us. Ah, Gladstone was the man for the poor! He passed the Ballot Act, and did away with the duty on paper — gave us cheap reading and education, did Gladstone!"

[1] The time was some years before the Old Age Pensions, or Mrs. Darling might have made exactly the same comments with regard to them.

Trevor Guy was willing to linger as a rule and to draw Mrs. Darling out, but this morning he looked a little weary, a little more dissipated, almost as if the fruits of evil tasted sour in his mouth. He turned away and walked out of the cottage just as Mrs. Emery came ponderously down the staircase and into the kitchen. Trevor Guy's long stride was then taking him fast along the dusty road, though he did not appear to hurry, and he was soon but a speck upon the highway, and then out of sight and lost in the traffic. And whether he turned to right or left, or kept straight on to his original goal, the Pool of London, does not matter. For the nonce he was gone out of Beauty Darling's life like an evil dream.

Mrs. Emery sat down heavily in a chair by the breakfast table — the meal was eaten in the kitchen for convenience — and fanned herself with her handkerchief ostentatiously, as if the heat even at this early hour oppressed her or she had a weight on her mind. She was a stout woman, and the literal interpretation of the movement occurred to her sister-in-law.

"I'm afraid you've had a hot night, Carrie. But you can have Tom's room now Mr. Guy has gone. Beauty will get it to rights before she goes off to school."

Mrs. Emery coughed. "It's true I was 'ot," she said. "And I didn't sleep much — but that's no wonder. So that man's gone?"

"Yes, well out of the way. I must say I'll be glad to have my house my own again, though he was little trouble saving the mess of his paints. But I don't care about a lodger."

"No," said Mrs. Emery gloomily. "I should say

he was well gone, too! With that girl of yours you ought to be careful, Mary."

"Beauty's all right at present — so long as no notions are put into her silly head!" said Mrs. Darling shortly. "In a year or so it'll be different." She knew that there were two things that her relations resented above all cause for them — her annuity and her adoption of a daughter. Poor Beauty had done very little that was right in their eyes since babyhood, and her pretty face was an aggravation of the offence of her small existence. To say truth, the girl had not taken much trouble to ingratiate herself with them either. She was inclined to be pert to their censure, and tossed her fair head with the assurance that they might wish her out of the way as much as they pleased, but "mother" was on her side, and their enmity mattered very little.

"There's no fear of *my* putting notions into her head — they're there already fast enough!" said Mrs. Emery resentfully. "I don't like to speak no evil of anyone, Mary, but what's bred in the bone will out in the blood, as you've many times admitted. What can you expect of a child that comes off a doorstep of disreputable parents but ingratitude and loose ways? Well, *I* say nothing! If I'm wrong, I'm wrong. I'm glad the man's gone out of your house anyway!" said Mrs. Emery, cutting a crust off the loaf with vicious enjoyment.

"What do you mean?" demanded Mrs. Darling, and for the first time there was some glimmer of apprehension in her. Although she knew that Mrs. Emery and the rest of her connexions had many times tried to make the worst of Beauty without any real

cause, the reference to the girl's parentage told. She had so often, herself, blamed any small misdemeanours to some hereditary taint. "You'd better tell me straight out if you know anything, Carrie," she went on firmly, putting the cover back over the bacon. "It's no kindness to the girl to keep it back."

Mrs. Emery wanted her breakfast, and was huffed by the challenge of her sister-in-law's tone. She flung her accusation out at once, seeing that until the discussion was over she would get no further served.

"Well, you ask me if I slep'. No, I *didn't* sleep, and it wasn't the heat. There was a door creaking, and then steps, and then voices in the next room — *his* room. And if you like such goings on in your house, Mary, I've no more to say."

Mrs. Darling's hard face had flushed to a dull crimson, and the veins on her temple swelled. Guy's shrewd guess that she was of apoplectic habit when he first saw her seemed justified. But she curbed her temper, and only spoke sharply.

"You've nothing to go on but fancy, Carrie Emery, and you're taking the girl's character away because you think you heard noises — like as not the mice. I tell you she wouldn't do such a thing — she wouldn't *dare!* What more have you to go on? Did you get up and see if there was anything?"

"No, I didn't *see* her go into his room —" Mrs. Emery was furious in her turn —"but I heard enough. They was talking, leastways 'e was,— and then she begins to cry. They must have been the other side the wall, just close to my head. I could hear them as plain as I hear you —"

But there was nothing to hear, for Mrs. Darling

was speechless. She sprang up from her seat at the table and went upstairs, her face a still darker red. Beauty was putting Guy's room to rights before she came down to breakfast, for she must start for school immediately afterwards. The dazed look was still in her eyes, but it darkened to sudden active fear, and she gave a sharp cry as her foster-mother caught her by the arm and swung her round to face her.

Mrs. Darling did not waste time. She was convinced of the child's guilt before she gave her a chance to deny, and when she did the denial went for nothing. She worked herself up into the heat of her passion as she talked, sparing the girl nothing, and accusing her in such terms as only the poor use, of her vileness. When Beauty burst out with trembling denials she almost struck her. The girl's very immaturity seemed to aggravate her into plainer speaking than if she had come to her full womanhood, as it was certainly the more shocking. The storm of words beat about the child's bewildered brain, terrifying her to madness, and she contradicted wildly, working herself up in her turn. Beauty lied through fear, when she might have been honest through preference. She had had nothing to do with Guy, she sobbed — she had never been near him — it was all a dirty shame that she should be accused of such things —

But her foster-mother had reached the acme of her wrath. "You little harlot!" she stormed. "I'll turn you out into the streets from which I took you. I've taught you to be respectable like my own daughters, and you've disgraced yourself and me. You wait! I'll give you such a beating as you won't forget —"

Beauty turned and fled. She did not see the woman

gasp and stagger, or fall sideways on the bed — *that* bed! — but with the madness of fear full upon her she raced to her own room, banged the door and locked it. With trembling hands she gathered up most of her small wardrobe and pushed it into the "pilgrim" basket which was all her luggage did she go away for a holiday, and strapping it roughly, flung on her school hat. She was panting with sobs, but not shedding many tears as yet. Some strain in the birth which Mrs. Darling flung in her teeth may have made her less fitted to face the crisis than a slower and more stolid girl might have been. Mrs. Darling's own progeny would have burst out crying at once, but would not really have been so upset, and would certainly have weathered the storm more philosophically. Beauty was only irresponsible with fright — the horror of last night, and the double horror of this morning's discovery.

She caught up the pilgrim basket in her hand — girls of her class are used to carrying heavier loads — unlocked the door and looked shrinkingly into the narrow passage. But there was no terrible wrath awaiting her there, and without staying to wonder why, or that no one had tried her door, she ran straight downstairs and out of the cottage. She had not had time to take all her trifling belongings with her — indeed, she was too confused — but she had got the precious sovereign. That unhallowed gift, and two or three shillings given her by Mrs. Darling to make some small purchases for herself, was the only money she had. It was not an hour since Trevor Guy had told her that she never knew when she might need it, and already it had come to pass.

As the girl ran out of the gate and a little way along the road the old horse omnibus that still runs through Wandlebridge lumbered along past her. She hailed it, glad of the escape, and swinging her basket up on to the conductor's step, was passed on into the dusk of the inside. Hardly anyone had been passing at the moment, and there was no one in the bus she happened to know. Beauty had "covered her tracks" as cleverly as if she had planned to do it.

. . . . . .

When Mrs. Emery grew tired of waiting for her breakfast she helped herself to cold bacon with a disapproving sniff and proceeded to eat it. It was not a successful breakfast, for the tea was overdrawn, and Mrs. Darling not returning she had no one to speak to. But she supposed that Beauty was "catching it" upstairs, and was rather pleased at the prolonged process.

"Serve her right, the little slut!" said Mrs. Emery charitably. "If Mary had taken one of her own folks when she wanted to adopt a child this would never have happened. She'll turn out a bad lot, I always said so. And Mary's beginning to know it, thank the Lord!"

It is extraordinary the amount of gratitude that is offered to God for the works of the Devil. But Mrs. Emery was not a logician, and she was comfortably aware of having killed two birds with one envious stone — unmasked the interloper, Beauty, and forced the retribution she desired upon her sister-in-law. Therefore she saw fit to offer up pious thanks.

"It's a judgment on 'em both!" she said to her-

self, buttering a third slice of bread, and watering the teapot.

The judgment being considerably delayed, however, Mrs. Emery thought fit to toil slowly upstairs at last with the intention of administering poisoned beatitude —"There, Mary, I'm sure that's all said that can be said — and the 'arm being done we must hope for the best." (She meant worst.) "And it's bounden on you after all to think where she comes from, and I *must* say you've only yourself to look to!" (She would never have dared to say so to Mary Darling in reality, but the rehearsal was balm to her mind.) "As to you, miss —" etc., her fancy playing round Beauty with her provoking face blurred by tears.

By the time Mrs. Emery reached the upper landing she was a little frightened — the cottage was so very still. She had expected to find Mrs. Darling and her foster-daughter still vilifying each other, and carrying on a verbal warfare at least. What she did find was Mary Darling's body fallen sideways on the unmade bed,— breathing stertorously, while further investigations proved that Beauty was not in the house at all, and that her cupboards were half emptied and herself and her pilgrim basket gone.

Mrs. Emery's first highly coloured thought was that the girl had assaulted her foster-mother and half killed her, but common sense argued that a girl of Beauty's age and small build would not have the least chance with a woman of Mrs. Darling's powerful physique, even if taken unawares, and when the doctor came he tersely pronounced it an apoplectic stroke, with no more explanation necessary than that Mrs. Darling had overtaxed herself in the early summer weather.

Mrs. Emery admitted to the woman having "had words" with her foster-daughter, who had behaved "very bad, sir! Enough to give anyone a fit, indeed!"

"Very well," said the doctor offhandedly, "then you had better keep her away from Mrs. Darling as long as you can. She must not be excited or disturbed if she rallies, which I very much doubt at her age. Let the girl do the housework and you the nursing." And he hurried away, having no time to waste in listening to the shortcomings of Mrs. Darling's "girl."

Mrs. Emery did not explain that Beauty had run away. She took it for granted that the girl had gone to join her seducer, and was anxious to suppress such a story as long as possible from the neighbours, burning with righteous indignation though she was. She honestly thought that Beauty had seen her foster-mother taken ill and had added callous ingratitude to her other sins by leaving her in her extremity and rushing off to Trevor Guy. But Mrs. Emery was a little uneasy in her conscience over her own part of the affair, and not averse to hushing it up for a while in case Mrs. Darling rallied. It would be time enough to confess to Beauty's flight then. Therefore when inquiries came from the school as to the girl's non-appearance, Mrs. Emery sent down a hurried message as to her sister-in-law's illness, and left the head mistress to suppose that the girl's presence was necessary at home. One or two further inquiries for Mrs. Darling followed, but she was too respectable a person for Beauty's mistresses to have the faintest suspicion of the girl coming to any harm, and Mrs. Emery car-

ried on her little deception unmolested, nursing her sister-in-law faithfully, to do her justice, and keeping the laundry girl to help at times with the housework.

Three weeks later Mary Darling died without ever having become fully conscious. Towards the end it seemed that she tried to speak, and there was a strange, earnest look in her eyes that Mrs. Emery did not much care to think about afterwards. Her speech had been unintelligible, and, after all, she might not have wished to see or hear of her foster-daughter again. Supposing that she had been going to charge her sister-in-law to look after or mount guard over her, it would have been very awkward; even a message of forgiveness would have involved seeking her out and an effort at reclaiming her, and Mrs. Emery did not feel at all inclined to do either.

But by that time all trace of Beauty Darling had been lost in Wandlebridge, and so if Mrs. Emery had wished ever so honestly it would have required the aid of the police to find her.

CHAPTER III

BEAUTY DARLING left the omnibus at Balham Station and took a ticket for Victoria. She was still so bruised and shaken in mind that she pursued her course mechanically, only certain of the fact that "mother" had turned her out into the street, and that she must get as far as possible from that vengeful figure. At the back of her mind — a long way back — there was the incredulous feeling that mother did not mean it, and that the only home she had ever known was not closed to her, whatever she had done. But she was really afraid of Mrs. Darling's physical violence, and had the impulse to flee for the present, until the immediate storm was overpast, and perhaps come back some day when time had changed passion to anxiety and she was half welcome as a repentant prodigal. It is a notable fact that the modern prodigal always has a sneaking consciousness of his own effective figure, and looks upon the fatted calf as a perquisite bound to fall to him sometime.

Beauty was not so ignorant or so lost as a country girl would have been in the same circumstances; but on the other hand she had not nearly the knowledge of London that the true Cockney has. Her experience was somewhat limited, owing to Mrs. Darling's careful up-bringing, but she was tolerably familiar with the suburbs south of the river. She was going to the real London, the London that runs from the

City to Kensington and from Regent's Park to Westminster Bridge, because she had the blind instinct to find "something to do" there, her veritable market being the stage, as she had told Guy. And indeed, as she had little or nothing to offer except a pretty face and a neat body, it was not a bad selection. Even an artist's model has to learn something in the patient endurance of posing and keeping her position. The stage is less exacting in taking raw material for certain classes of production.

There were only one or two people in the third-class carriage in which Beauty deposited herself and her basket, and they were mostly of the working class that catches the 8.30 and gets to business soon after nine. The men looked at the girl with a passing interest and some sympathy, for she was still sniffling and keeping back the tears with difficulty. She looked with her basket like a little schoolgirl going back to her tasks after a pleasant holiday, and crying at parting with kind friends; but she had got a corner seat, and turned her shoulder to her neighbours, looking out of the window, so that nobody offered her open sympathy.

Beauty had once or twice been to stay with some relations of Mrs. Darling's in the country, and she and her foster-mother had taken excursions to the seaside. This was the child's idea of travelling. But because on the last occasion they had had time to fit in between the suburban train that brought them to Victoria and the one that took them to Brighton, they had left their luggage in the cloak-room, and had had something to eat while waiting; this programme suggested itself to her mind mechanically, and without deliberate in-

tention she found herself at the cloak-room, handing her basket over to the clerk, and receiving the ticket in exchange. From the cloak-room she went to the ladies' waiting-room and looked at herself in the glass there. She had not cried sufficiently to spoil her face, but it was paler and more woebegone than usual, and her heart sank at the thought of interviewing a London Manager as she was, not even fortified by the knowledge of her best blouse and a hat with flowers on it! It did seem hard luck, but in her hasty flight she had had no time to think of future exigencies, and was dressed as she would have gone to school, in a plain white shirt and dark skirt, and a sailor hat. It was a coincidence that she was going to attempt to see a theatrical Manager dressed exactly as Guy had told her to be; but certainly from no inclination on her own part. Beauty took off the despised hat and shook out her curls, wishing she had a comb to put through them. She was by no means confident of success as she made her way out of the station into the busy streets.

It was now past nine o'clock, and she was very hungry, for she had had no breakfast before her headlong flight. It was probably owing to the hour, and the numberless young men and girls setting out to their daily toil, that she had escaped being accosted, and had gone on her way unmolested, save for a passing stare at her pretty face. She went into a bun-shop outside Victoria Station and had a cup of tea and a bun, hiding herself as much as possible in a distant corner of the shop. She was still in fear of being followed and brought back to justice, though she would have indignantly denied that she was doing

any harm in running away. It had been forced upon her, in her own estimation, and she was merely doing the best she could for herself. Of Guy she never thought, save with shrinking horror. She had always been more or less afraid of him, and his influence over her was partly hypnotic. Far from wishing to seek him out and appeal to him, she was terrified at the idea of meeting him, and hardly dared to glance at the face of any tall man she passed. He had not told her where he was going, and she was thankful that she had no clue to his whereabouts. The terror and the shock for which he had been responsible, both directly and indirectly, had jarred the girl's mind and left her with a feeling against men that was almost unreasoning.

Beauty's fare to London and her breakfast had only cost a shilling, and had left her with some silver besides the precious sovereign. It now came to the question of how she was to see the Manager of a theatre and ask him to let her "walk on" until she was fit for something better. Lucy's experiences helped her here, and she knew that this was the first step in the way she meant to tread. But it was too early — not more than ten o'clock — to hope to see a Manager. Even Beauty knew that. And so for the next half-hour she walked about the streets, a little disappointed in the shops until she reached the Buckingham Palace Road, where she sated her elementary little soul with the glories of Gorringe and the smaller milliners. Even this was educative, for she began to see that fashion was not limited to Balham, but rose to fairer heights elsewhere. If only she could have bought one of those flattened headgears (it was a year of

"soup-plate" hats) and a long silk frock, she would have felt really grown up, and would have faced a Dramatic Academy with assurance! She caught sight of her own discontented little face under its plain straw headgear, and turned away with more despondence over her own future than she had experienced yet.

When it turned half-past ten Beauty took her fading courage in both hands and began to think of the best way of reaching Allonby's. She was going to Allonby's because it was the name uppermost in her mind, having been so recently impressed on her by Guy. "Go to Edgar Allonby at Allonby's Theatre — don't forget the name," he said. If Beauty had known enough of London theatres to classify them as Comedy, Drama, Melodrama, or Shakespeare, she would probably have chosen the Lyceum, her ideal being something of the "Lass that Loved a Soldier" variety. But her ignorance limited her to the one theatre specially pointed out to her, and she did not even know the exact locality of that. If she asked anyone it might sound suspicious, and she shrank with horror from the beginning of inquiries that might end in her being reclaimed and sent home. She had managed so well so far, she thought, with youth's own conceit. She could not be foiled now! Then a passing hansom caught her eye, and her heart leapt. Beauty had never ridden in a hansom, as it chanced, and the child in her snatched eagerly at the treat of a ride and a new experience, while the extravagance became justified in her mind by the bright idea that it would look more important and experienced if she arrived at the theatre in a cab. People who wanted to go on the

stage always drove up to the theatre in a cab, of course. Beauty hailed the hansom, trembling with excitement, and the driver, after a minute's hesitation, drew up at the curb. His suspicious stare changed to a smile of broad amusement as Beauty gave the destination.

"Will you take me to Allonby's Theatre, please?"

"All right," said the cabman, a little more satisfied, for he thought she was one of the chorus girls late for rehearsal who had been driven to the expedient of engaging him to get her there, and though he rather doubted his fare's ability to pay, he good-humouredly took the risk. The traffic was thick that morning, and it took even a cab some twenty-five minutes to reach the great house in the Strand, while once or twice they were actually blocked, and Beauty looked out of the open front on the great gay world rolling past on its pleasurable business — it seemed pleasurable to her in the youth of the season and her own eager vitality. The glitter and the brightness stimulated her, and the excitement of her own adventures made her heart beat and brought a flush to her face again. She felt so important as she got out of the cab and paid the driver his eighteenpence, though it left her only ninepence of her loose change; and as she walked into the great vestibule of the theatre her only pang was that she had not a long frock!

The cabman had taken her to the entrance of Allonby's, and not to the stage-door. Beauty found herself in what seemed a veritable palace to her inexperienced eyes, and after a minute's hesitation she walked up to the box-office and looked in at the clerk with her dark blue eyes shining under the black lashes.

As a matter of fact she was beginning to be frightened, but there were only the rosy cheeks and the brilliant eyes to betray her.

"I want to see Mr. Edgar Allonby, please!" she said collectedly.

The box-office clerk stared at her for a minute with the same amusement as the cab-driver. If she had not been so pretty and so absurdly young he would have dismissed her peremptorily, but as it was he saw fit to laugh.

"Oh, do you!" he said. "Well, he doesn't show round this side of the house, you know!" Then he called to another man in the office behind him, as if to attract his attention to something worth seeing. This person came forward languidly, stared in his turn, and then began to smile too.

"You had better go round to the stage-door," he said. "But you won't find him at this hour of the morning!"

"I don't know," said the first man in a lower voice. "I believe he came in a few minutes ago; there's a special rehearsal at eleven."

"Oh well, she can go round and see. They won't let her in without an appointment, I expect."

There followed a lower colloquy, with frequent glances at Beauty, who stood waiting with a sinking heart. It had seemed such a straight and easy thing to go to the theatre and ask for Mr. Allonby, and she had not realized that it was as easy to see Royalty as the great Manager. At last the man who had first spoken turned to her again.

"What do you want to see Mr. Allonby about? Have you an appointment?" he said, still obviously

amused. Beauty began to feel a little indignant, to realize that she was being treated like a child and no seriousness assigned to her. It was so grave a step in her own mind, so overwhelmingly important, that she could not tolerate trifling. The straight brows came down into a frown and the red lips tightened.

"I want to see Mr. Allonby on business — my own, and not yours!" she said, with the sharp repartee of the London schoolchild. "Will you tell me where I can find him?"

"All right, Miss Saucy! Go round to the stage-door — and get snubbed!" the clerk retorted in his turn. "First turning on the right out of Burleigh Street."

Beauty tossed her curls and turned away. The encounter had done her a good turn in that it had changed nervousness into anger. She was determined to see Mr. Allonby now, with all her little mind, let the result be what it might.

It took her some ten minutes to find the stage-door, having no experience of the mysterious way in which the backs of theatres open off many streets into unexpected neighbourhoods. But having located it at last between an eating-house and a coal-bin in a narrow turning off Burleigh Street, she pushed it open without further ceremony, and found herself in a dark passage with an office on her right where a man was boiling a large kettle over a small fire, despite the warm day. He looked up as she entered, and stared as the booking-office clerk had done.

"Hulloa, what do *you* want?" he said.

"I want to see Mr. Edgar Allonby!"

"So do a good many people," said the doorkeeper dryly. "Have you an appointment?"

Then Beauty told her first lie in her desperation —

"Yes!"

"What's your name?"

"Miss Darling!"

The man looked dubious, and referred to some papers in a rack on the wall. It had not occurred to Beauty that the officialism of the theatre would check and verify any assertion of hers, and her heart sank again as he shook his head.

"What time was your appointment?" he said suspiciously. "I've no instructions with regard to you."

"At eleven o'clock," said Beauty desperately, remembering the clerk's aside to his colleague as to the Manager's arrival at the theatre at that hour. It was evident that the doorkeeper still hesitated, but he looked at Beauty again and seemed uncertain as to whether to turn her away.

"I've no orders to let you in," he said again, "but Mr. Allonby *is* in the theatre. There's a rehearsal on this morning — I dunno if he'll see you till that's over anyhow. But I'll take you through," he added, as the kettle boiled over and was hastily taken off. He raked out the fire, and beckoning Beauty to follow him, stepped into the dark passage. "What did you say your name was?" he asked.

"Miss Beauty Darling!"

"H'm!" said the man with a little laugh not unlike the box-office-keeper's. He put his large, unclean hand under Beauty's chin, and raising her face, stared into it with eyes which made her flinch. Her first impulse was to strike him and run away, for the terror was

uppermost again; but there was the stage-door between her and safety, and after a second he released her, though still with that ambiguous smile.

"I dare say he'll see you!" he remarked, as he led the way down numerous dark passages and corkscrew stairs that made Beauty feel she had entirely lost her way, and must be far below the level of the street. The bare walls and stone of the stairs had the chill of a cellar, and the theatre being but dimly lighted at the back was by no means the dazzling palace it looked in the front, while every now and then from some far and remote section of it came the sound of voices — hollow, echoing — as if some one were shouting muffled orders and many feet were keeping time. But the doorkeeper bore to the left, away from the voices, and then upstairs again, and through a swing door, and then down another long passage until at last he knocked gently at another door and waited respectfully for an answer. Beauty waited too, in the dim light of the place, and felt the solid ground quiver under her feet with the eeriness of her excitement.

The door was opened by some one who was coming out — a young man in glasses, with a sheaf of papers in his hands. He left the door open behind him while he had a low conversation with the doorkeeper, and through the aperture Beauty could see a small room with a writing-table and some chairs — apparently the outer office of some inner sanctum. Then she heard the young man in glasses say rather louder, "Well, if she has an appointment perhaps he will see her for a few minutes before rehearsal. What time was the appointment for, dear?" he added, turning to the small figure he could hardly see in the dusk.

"Eleven!" said Beauty mechanically, repeating her second lie in the hope that it would stand her in good stead.

The young man went back into the room, and disappeared through another door on the farther side. After a few seconds he reappeared and beckoned them into the light of the apartment, which was apparently his own office.

"Mr. Allonby doesn't remember the appointment," he said, looking rather hard at Beauty. "But he has a few minutes to spare. Have you come in Minnie Ferras's place, dear? Who sent you? Bannermann's?"

"Yes!" said Beauty again desperately, because it was the easiest thing to say.

"Well, come along," he said, leading the way to the farther door. "Hollis"—to the doorkeeper—"I want you—"

He opened the door, and almost pushed Beauty into the room, for in a sudden access of nervousness she stood as if paralysed. Then she heard the door close behind her, and realized that the doorkeeper and the young man in glasses were on the other side of it, while she was alone with the redoubtable Edgar Allonby.

The room in which she found herself was much more luxuriously furnished than the outer office, and resembled a library or smoking-room in a private house far more than a mere place in which to transact business. Beauty had never seen such a room, and was so impressed as to be still more tongue-tied. There was a thick carpet on the floor, and the long soft curtains somewhat softened the jolly May sun-

light streaming in at the windows, but the place seemed very light and airy after the cold and gloom of the lower portions of the theatre. Immediately opposite Beauty as she entered was a grand piano, an imposing object in the midst of the room; and to the right of her stood another writing-table and deep leather chair, behind which was a stand with a decanter of whisky, a siphon of soda-water, and tumblers. It was more convivial than businesslike, and not at all what she had anticipated,— any more than was the big man in a well-cut morning suit, with a sallow hairless face and eyes deeply set in wrinkles, who was standing on the bearskin rug in front of the empty fire-place. He had been lighting a cigar, and turned round leisurely at Beauty's entrance; but when he saw the slight figure of the child in her short skirt and plain straw hat, the same amusement crossed his face that had been on the box-office clerks' and the doorkeeper's. He held out his hand as she advanced a step into the room, and his manner was very good-tempered.

"Well, little girl, what do *you* want?" he said.

"I want to go on the stage!" said Beauty, regaining her self-possession suddenly, and shaking hands with him with a coolness at which his eyes twinkled. He put his hand under her chin exactly as the stage-doorkeeper had done, and looked at her even longer; but she resented the scrutiny less. For one thing, his hands were clean, and Beauty was by nature fastidious. For another, some subtle sense in her distinguished the Manager's notice from the doorkeeper's as a compliment from an impertinence.

"Oh, you do, do you!" he said, as if still more

amused. "And what can you do? Have you ever acted?"

"Yes, at school. I can sing, too."

This was true. Beauty had a good voice, and was always chosen for chorus, if not solos, at any entertainment given by the school. She sat down in one of the big leather chairs without being invited, and looked up with more confidence at Mr. Allonby, who in his turn sat down at the writing-table and looked at her in open entertainment.

"Well, sing me something, and let me hear!" he said. "Do you want an accompaniment?"

Beauty shook her head, but she went and stood by the great piano as if there were something appropriate in the juxtaposition. Now the song of the moment, the song *par excellence* in the public mind, was "Rock me in a daisy cradle," and was sung nightly at Allonby's by Miss Edna Carruthers, who was then at the top of the tree in Musical Comedy. The song was so hackneyed that it had reached throughout the length and breadth of London, and Beauty knew it by heart, as did most of her classmates, but it was still one of the draws of the piece, and Edna Carruthers was supposed to be inimitable in it. The audacity of getting up and singing that particular song to the Manager of Allonby's did not occur to Beauty, who was splendidly unconscious of any such thing in her extreme youth. She stood, to give herself more power and breath, and sang the first verse with a far-off and unconscious mimicry of the Musical Comedy star, for though she had never seen or heard her, everybody knew the drawl that came on "cra-adle," and the points throughout the verse — points

whose double meaning was really lost to Beauty, standing there with her baby face and curling hair in her short frock. When she stopped, indeed, she was a little taken aback by Allonby's roar of laughter.

"All right, little girl!" he said at last, patting her on the shoulder. "Don't be discouraged. You've got quite a nice little voice. By the way, Mr. Lewis, my secretary, thought that you were sent to me by Bannermann, the Agent — one of the younger girls in the chorus has got the measles, and the Chorus Mistress has to fill her place. Did you come from Bannermann, or are you a friend of Minnie Ferras?"

The deep-set eyes among the wrinkles had grown shrewder than ever, but as Beauty looked up at him she had an inspiration of candour. After all, she had managed to see Mr. Allonby, and the means she had used did not matter so much now!

"No, I don't know Minnie Ferras, and I didn't come from any Agent — I just wanted to get to see you and ask you to let me walk on!" she said, lifting her head with the courage of desperation. It chanced that the movement brought her within the shaft of a stray sunbeam, falling between the long curtains, and the light caught the edges of her bright hair and changed the brown into gold. The hand on her shoulder became a little heavier, but there was neither anger nor reproof in the face bent over her.

"Bluffed my sentinels and came in on your own, eh?" said Allonby, rather as if he enjoyed the confession. "Well, suppose I do take you and train you, you'll have to work hard, you know."

"Yes, I know — but I don't mind that!" said Beauty breathlessly.

"How old are you?"

"Sixteen!" said Beauty, lying again. But her eyes fell with the effort, for she knew that she hardly looked her real age.

The Manager raised his brows, and the corners of his folded mouth twitched a little. He knew that she was not telling the truth, but he did not dispute her assertion at the moment. He made a shrewd guess, rather, at the reasons that had brought this pretty lower-class child to him, for though he judged that she could not be sixteen she was not too young for the disaster that had befallen her in Edgar Allonby's unhallowed experience. He knew, when she was shown into his room, that he had never seen her before, and that she had had no appointment, and he had been curious to discover how she had had the luck to get into the theatre without one, and actually into his presence. The facts that there chanced to be a rehearsal that morning for new songs and business, that he himself was early at the theatre, and that there really was a vacancy amongst the youngest rank of the chorus, were all coincidences. Beauty's destiny had included a stroke of good or ill luck in her first assault on stage-doors that was little short of miraculous. Anyway, she was there, extraordinarily pretty, possessed of a good voice and neat figure, and of a type which Edgar Allonby recognized at once as suited to the requirements of his girls. He knew a good thing when he saw it, and it was not his business to ask too many questions. His inquiries were in consequence brief and to the point.

"Look here, dear, I'm not going to catechize you. I dare say you've been a naughty girl and got into

trouble with your people, eh? Well, don't do it any more!" (This easy lesson in morality was nowhere less likely to be learnt than behind the scenes at Allonby's. But it sounded infinitely charitable and kind to Beauty after Mrs. Darling's reception of the same slip.) "Do you live in London?"

"N-no—" Beauty hesitated. "I've been living with a woman on the South side—my mother's dead." She spoke more glibly, knowing that this was actually the truth as far as she knew it, Mrs. Darling's references to the gutter from which she came having revived it in her mind. She did not mention a father, which fact was silently noted by Allonby and interpreted truly. "I've left everybody I know now, and I want to work for myself," said Beauty grandly.

Allonby laughed again, and struck the little electric bell on his writing-table. "All right—I'll give you a trial," he said. "There's a rehearsal for new songs and business this morning, and you can go to the Chorus Mistress and learn what to do. I'll give you a pound a week, and you can go home with Mrs. Summers—one of our dressers—and she'll find you somewhere to live. Have you any money?"

"Yes, I've got a sovereign."

"Hold tight on it, then"—he laughed again—"and pay at the end of the week, when you will have earned some more." The bell had been answered by the young man in glasses, who looked at Beauty, sitting so coolly in the deep leather chair, with some curiosity. "My new leading lady, Ralph!" said Allonby dryly, pointing to her. "Miss— By the way, what's your name, little girl?"

"Beauty Darling!"

This time the secretary joined in the laugh, and when a minute later an older man came into the room she was reintroduced with mock ceremony as Miss Beauty Darling, the future leading lady of Allonby's! The men's amusement had the effect of abashing Beauty as no rebuff could have done, and she coloured uncomfortably, her little red mouth pouting in a fashion that was one day to become famous, and which evidently attracted the last-comer.

"I'm your Assistant Stage-Manager then, Miss Beauty!" he said, patting her cheek. "All right, Mr. Allonby, I'll look after her — come along with me and be introduced to the crowd." He took the child's hand in his own and held it while he arranged certain business details with Allonby, and then led her away with him through another door to the one by which she had entered, and which opened almost opposite to a small electric lift. The Assistant Stage-Manager — he had been called Mr. Wentworth to Beauty — put his charge into the lift, which he worked for himself, and took her up another floor or so, giving her the bewildered feeling that a theatre was really a town in itself behind the scenes, and that she had not the remotest idea in which direction lay that far-off stage-door by which she had pushed her way to possible fortune.

The lift brought them to another corridor and a door with "Rehearsal Room" painted in uncontrovertible letters, into which they entered. It was a large bare apartment, without carpet or draperies, and no furniture beyond another piano and some chairs on which a dozen girls of Beauty's age or younger were resting and talking, while a lady was standing

at the piano arranging some loose slips of music. This lady turned on their entrance and showed Beauty a capable face and a great amount of black hair dressed in so many puffs and curls and partings that her head seemed an advertisement of half-a-dozen different styles of coiffure.

"Well, Mr. Wentworth, what is it?" she said sharply.

"Oh, Miss Praed, I've brought you a recruit," said the Assistant Stage-Manager. "Mr. Allonby wants this girl put in Minnie Ferras's place. Been at it long?"

"No, we've only just begun."

"Well, Mr. Hughes wants you down on the stage at twelve o'clock — think they can sing the chorus of Miss Carruthers's song by then?"

"They must, if Mr. Hughes wants them!" said Miss Praed grimly. "Kittie Smart, show this girl Minnie Ferras's position, please — she stands next to you, doesn't she?"

"Yes, Miss Praed." A thin dark child, who looked older than Beauty, came forward and beckoned her away from Wentworth. She was by no means pretty, according to Beauty's canons of taste, but she had beautiful dark eyes, and when "made up" and enhanced by a flaxen wig she was more effective across the footlights than many a more regular-featured girl. Big eyes, sharp features, and a good outline of body were, as Beauty gradually discovered, the real points for a stage success. The rest could be easily altered or added. Kitty had a precocity that excelled anything Beauty had ever encountered, even

at school, and began to chatter at once without any shyness.

"So Minnie's got the push! Rotten luck for her. Are you a friend of hers?"

"No, I don't know her."

"Well, she came on next to me — I'm corner girl. I'll show you. Ever been on before?"

"No!"

"You'll have to look sharp and catch us up — we've had one rehearsal. I wonder why Papa took you! — we always call Mr. Allonby 'Papa,' even the old hands."

"Because I asked him, I suppose!" said Beauty impertinently, the instinct to assert herself rising against the other child's coolness. Kittie opened her big eyes and laughed.

"Oh, I dare say! — tell that to the supers. What's your name?"

"Beauty Darling."

"My! That's modest!" But her look at Beauty's face was shrewdly envious. "I've been in the panto three years — know the ropes now. I suppose you've never been behind before?"

"No," said Beauty reluctantly. "But I've got a friend who's been on the stage two years." This boast was not quite true, for Lucy Dale had never been a friend of hers. Beauty was too young to associate with her when at school, and Lucy had belonged to the ambitious, hard-working type of girl who does not gravitate towards Beauty Darlings. But failing her own experience Beauty wanted to assert some one else's.

"Oh," said Kittie interestedly. "Where is she? At the Satyr? That's an awful house — the Satyr girls are all fasties from the time they go on at our age, and old Nolly O'Donovan's a beast — you should just hear! Where's your friend?"

"She's on tour, with a Shakespeare Company," said Beauty, rather crestfallen, for it sounded less exciting than the Satyr.

"My word! She is up in the flies! You won't find much Shakespeare here.—I wish they'd get on. Wentworth always stays jawing to Miss Praed — she's his girl!"

Beauty glanced at the Chorus Mistress in blank surprise. She had not struck her as attractive, but it was true that she was carrying on a low-toned conversation with the Assistant Stage-Manager, and the whispered comments of the little chorus girls were more personal than respectful. Kittie had time to explain that they were all a new feature of Allonby's, and had been engaged to sing as a fairy chorus of Miss Carruthers's new song, the piece having run for six months and wanting new "fat." The children were dressed as fairies, and came on riding on the shoulders of men dressed as ogres. The tallest of the supers were chosen for these parts, and the lightest girls, who, whether they liked it or no, were tossed up like babies in the arms of their attendants and handled as freely as dolls. Kittie herself belonged to a troupe of dancers, six in number, who were always engaged together, and went by the names of Our Dollie, Our Poppie, Our Lottie, Our Fannie, and Our Nellie. The rest of the chorus, including the unfortunate Minnie whose place Beauty had taken, were

drawn from less distinguished ranks of performers; but they had mostly had some experience.

"You'll pick it up all right," said Kittie with good-natured encouragement. "And if Papa has taken a fancy to you, Hughes will have to be decent. (Hughes is our Stage-Manager — and he can, just! Every one's a bit afraid of him.) I hate this fairy chorus, but you mustn't be squeamish —"

"Now, girls!"

Miss Praed's baton rapped the music-stand, and the work began in earnest as Mr. Wentworth left the room. It was not very hard work to Beauty, for she had a good ear, and the immediate necessity for the chorus was that they should get a catchy waltz tune by heart and know the cues. But the monotony of entrance and exit, the repetition of movement, and the going over and over the same phrase, made her head ache before the first part of her task was ended. Miss Praed trooped her children off at twelve o'clock with a punctuality she had not shown at the beginning of the rehearsal, and by the same wonderful and winding ways brought them to a lower level, until the sound of voices and movements that Beauty had heard on first entering the theatre grew clearer again. But she did not expect to emerge on to the naked stage quite so suddenly as she did, and at a moment's notice it seemed to her that she gave a gasp and had passed through gaunt skeletons of flapping canvas and scaffolding — could those be the wings that looked so real from the front? — into a glare of light and the hub of the universe.

There it was, the real stage, the place that was nearly a palace or a forest or a ship in mid-ocean,

from the other side of the footlights, and on which it seemed almost impossible not to act amongst such realistic surroundings — there it was, and it had changed to a slope of bare boards, so awkward to walk on that it upset all one's calculations at once; while the backcloths and the wings and the drops were mere blurs of paint and outlines, horribly unlike anything that ever was on land or sea. As to the glamour of the footlights, they were nothing but a glare that made one blink, bewildered, and the gulf of the house beyond was insignificant and not at all inspiring. The reaction in Beauty's mind was followed by the natural thought that this was only because it was a rehearsal, and that at a real performance things could not be so tawdry and prosaic and suggestive of the machinery that slung them all together; but she shrank back instinctively, and Kittie had to push her up the slope of the boards and into the corner where the "children's chorus" were crowded together until wanted.

The scene was set for the second act of "The Queen of Hearts," and as it happened to represent the Residency in some remote Sandwich island, of course there was a heavy marble seat under a clump of (stage) bamboo. On this seat were sitting some real ladies of the chorus, also waiting their turn, and holding a twittering conversation amongst themselves. In the front of the stage the comedian and the leading man were arranging the details of some new business with a lady in the flimsiest of silk blouses and a pancake hat tied with strings under one ear, while in front of them, with his back to the house, stood a young man who did not look more than thirty, with a thin, clean-shaven face, and a cigarette in his mouth.

"Is that—" began Beauty, nudging Kittie Smart to distract her attention from Our Dollie, who was talking to her.

"Sh-sh-sh! Yes; that's Mr. Hughes!" said Kittie, looking round quickly. He looked so insignificant to Beauty after Mr. Allonby's huge, burly figure that she regarded him with indifference.

"I don't see what they're all afraid of," she said, turning her eyes more interestedly on Miss Carruthers.

"You wait till he's bucketing his Company!"

Beauty had not long to wait. Mr. Hughes suddenly raised his voice, and the authority in it was unmistakable. "Now, then; every one for the finale of the act, please — if those girls have not finished dressing they must come as they are," he said.

"It's new dresses as well as business, and they're not ready," Kitty whispered, as the chorus girls already present rose from the marble seat and took up their positions. Then they began to come on from all sides, "just as they were," as the Stage-Manager had decreed, for the new costumes were not finished and the department that looked after such things was seething. Some of the girls were in full dress, some in their own most unofficial mufti, one or two in a morning blouse and a skirt that belonged to their evening gowns in the play. The effect was parti-coloured and indescribable. One girl had the label still pinned to her gown that meant the alterations which there had been no time to make, and they hurried to their places as if driven by some former experience. There was no orchestra to-day; but the Chorus Mistress went to the piano standing in the wings

(Allonby's seemed rich in pianos) to act as accompanist, and very wonderful she was, running off handfuls of notes at the suggestion of the Stage-Manager, and cutting in with accentuated time when the voices threatened to fall like "dropping shots." The Conductor only attended full rehearsals, not new business, professionally; but he was present, and added to the formidable array of authority by occasionally waving an arm and stamping a foot to impress the time on the rank and file. Add to this the Assistant Stage-Manager, with one eye on his chief, running to and fro to push people into their places if they were utterly lost, and the property man, who was obliged to dash in and out in record time with his properties between the new business to be rehearsed, and the staff of Allonby's is complete.

It was fortunate for the children that they had never yet been included in the final tableau, and that Hughes did not expect them to know their work or positions until he had patiently instructed them. They were driven off into the wings for the moment, and the grand dance of the finale was taken through, even the principals being expected to take up their rightful positions. For a minute it seemed that all was going well, and then like the first clap of thunder the Stage-Manager struck his hands together, the piano stopped, and the whole cast, at first unable to collect themselves, fell into silence a bar or two behind.

"You're all like a damned flock of lost sheep!" came the hard ringing voice from the stalls where Hughes had moved down to be out of the way of the dance. "It isn't like this at night — why the devil aren't you in your right places?"

The tone of an angry man using expletives is very much more forcible than the same words written. Kittie squeezed Beauty's arm, and looked at her with triumph in her eyes. "He's beginning — what did I tell you?" she said. "Oh, it's going to be hot for them in a minute!" Beauty did not think it sounded at all pleasant; she craned her head forward to watch what was going on, and saw the irrepressible chorus beginning to whisper again amongst themselves while Hughes called out two men in particular for correction. The surprising point of his remarks to her unlearned ears was his familiar way of addressing them while he bullied them. But that is theatrical etiquette.

"No, dear boy, come down stage — now you, old boy, move to the right." The two men obeyed as puppets might a showman. They were all "old boys," and the girls were "my child," though he might curse them in the same breath.

"I'm glad we're not on!" whispered Beauty.

"Our turn next," said Kittie, with a wicked laugh. "Look out! the girls are not attending — oh, my aunt! he will let fly!"

"Take that chorus again," said the Stage-Manager, "just to impress it on you — now, end of duet — come along, come along! I've never known you so slow. I suppose you are waiting for the resurrection!"

The principals gave the last bars of the duet, and the chorus took up their part, merging again into the dance. But even Beauty could see this time that they were not well together, and the next instant the music had stopped again, and the storm broke.

"You fools! Have you all gone mad?" thundered the Stage-Manager. "I've just told you — we shall have disaster on the night. Get back to your places." Three more bars, and then the man who had been called out before made a fatal blunder, and was hopelessly in the way of the front ranks when he should have been at the back. Hughes was on him in an instant.

"You ass! Why don't you do as I tell you? You're here to do as you are told! What are you doing, you fool?" He seemed fit to foam at the mouth, and the browbeaten actor turned to bay like a bewildered stag.

"I was only doing my best!" he said sullenly.

"You weren't — you were making a damned idiot of yourself!" shouted the Stage-Manager, his hands gripping the stall in front of him, and his terrible, bright eyes on every corner of the stage at once as well as the unfortunate man who was up for censure. Those who had been chattering amongst themselves recognized, too late, that they were under observation, and waited helplessly for the storm to break on them also, for the Stage-Manager at Allonby's was not dreaded without reason. The slight, boyish figure shook with rage — the words rushed out like blows and hit the quivering chorus. Syddie Hughes was bucketing his Company!

Peeping over Kittie's shoulder Beauty caught sight of a big quiet figure standing in the stalls also, a little behind Hughes, and recognized Edgar Allonby. She wondered whether his presence would be any check on the manner and language of his subordinate, but he only smiled as if well satisfied, and sat down in the

stalls for a few minutes. He did not interfere with his sweating, swearing Stage-Manager, but his presence was another inspiration of awe, and a little ripple like visible nerves passed over the chorus. They began to do better, too — the voices came together like scattered strands of sound gathered into a musical pattern, the feet went like clockwork, one felt the whole scene moving with a spring and finish to the final tableau. Edgar Allonby turned in his stall and nodded to himself, and Miss Praed at the piano felt the last clash of a chord in full sympathy with the swing of the crowd behind her.

"Thank you!" said the Stage-Manager slowly, his words dropping three semitones and falling to deep-breathed satisfaction. "That's better. *That's* more like my Company!"

A minute later he added: "Now the children's troop for the final tableau, please," in his ordinary tones, and Kittie sprang to attention and led, with Beauty following upon her heels. But the work just witnessed had made her very anxious to do her best, and both in this grouping and the chorus to Miss Edna Carruthers's song the new girl at Allonby's concentrated her frightened faculties on the instructions given her, to the saving of all save a few sharp rebukes. That first rehearsal had taught Beauty Darling one thing — the right of man to swear at a woman on the stage. Her ears were not yet hardened, and she shrank as from a blow. In time she would come to look on bad language as a natural expression, for herself as well as others; for great is the power of familiarity.

CHAPTER IV

THERE began a period of hard work for Beauty of which she had not dreamed, and for which she would certainly have had little inclination if it had been revealed to her beforehand. But the necessity of bread and butter is a provision of Nature to turn even the shirker into some sort of self-supporting citizen, and the child found, as she had all her little life, that it was a question of "needs must." Somebody was always driving her, in Beauty's experience — first it was Mrs. Darling to unwelcome duties, then her teachers to unwelcome tasks, now it was her empty stomach to the labour of earning her own bread. She had thought of the stage as a life where one did very much as one liked — in spite of Lucy Dale's experience — varied with the amusement of "dressing up." Of the long tedious hours spent at rehearsal, sometimes in doing nothing while other portions of the piece were being rehearsed in which she had no part — of the chorus calls, and the dancing calls, and the full-cast calls — of belated meals and footsore bodies, jaded and exhausted with standing — she had certainly known nothing until she "went on" at Allonby's.

There were rehearsals nearly every day during that record run of "The Queen of Hearts," for no one knew better than Mr. Sydney Hughes how to prevent a company from getting stale after the three-hundred-

and-sixtieth performance, and to keep them up to the mark with improvements and alterations. The restless figure and keen face became as much an object of respect, not to say fear, to Beauty Darling as to anyone else at Allonby's. To have Syddie Hughes single her out for reprimand was a thing at which even a chorus girl quailed. His tongue was like the lash of a whip, and some sixth sense seemed to tell him which unit in the whole huge mass was not using voice or feet to the utmost capacity.

"If you don't sing you can go. Or you know the penalty"— was a frequent threat held over the head of the chorus, the penalty in this case being a prohibition from appearing in the evening performance, which meant that the salary for the night was deducted. When your salary is only a pound a week, as Beauty's was at first, a fine is a serious matter, and a plea of a bad cold or even obvious hoarseness, was not accepted — they were there to work, and work they must. There were fines also for coming late, either to rehearsal or the performance — "the show" as it is called. When the girls arrived they were checked by the stage-doorkeeper, Hollis, and their names entered in his book, which was then sent up to the Stage Manager at the hour when rehearsal had been called, and those that were missing were noted, even though they might by that time have arrived. Then the names were read over again from what is called "the roll-call" book, and if a girl failed to answer she was again fined as missing. Beauty Darling learned to overcome her natural tendency to dawdle and to be punctual and conscientious, through sheer necessity, for it was not only the dreaded

Hughes whose eye seemed to be always upon her, but Wentworth, the Assistant, the scene-shifters, and the limelight-men — even the call-boys frequently acted as spies to see whether the girls were "slacking."

"You have to biff out for all you're worth at this job," said little Kittie Smart in the confidence of the dressing-room. "Most of the Satyr girls are 'keeps,' and can do as they like, because their men pay for 'em. Their management won't give them the push for slacking! But we're different at Allonby's — talk about an easy life! My aunt!"

Certainly it was a life that did not begin very early, unless there were a call at eleven, which necessitated getting up at ten however scamped one's toilette, to allow time for a tram-ride, for nearly all the girls lived some way out in the suburbs. Beauty quickly fell out of the routine of her schooldays, and the eight o'clock breakfast and nine or half-past school, and learned to combine her breakfast and lunch, or to run tea into supper; but once the day was begun the hours went on and on, and stretched into the night, ending very late. Her curly head often felt dull and sleepy, and her blue eyes closed before she had well reached the pillow. I fear that had Mrs. Summers (in whose charge Edgar Allonby had placed her) looked into the narrow room where her charge kept her few possessions, she would often have seen a heap of clothes fallen on the floor as the child had stripped them off, and Beauty herself, unwashed and uncombed, huddled under the bedclothes and dead asleep, with her red lips apart — beautiful even then, in her squalor and neglect of her body, the one perfect thing that God had given her as yet.

A child of fourteen — even a child of Beauty's class, which is far older than those in a higher station — is not the best keeper of herself, physically or mentally. Beauty lived haphazard, taking her meals with the dresser when at home, but too often spending what money she had on cakes when she had to run out for food from rehearsal. The child in her was easily tempted by sweets in place of the solid wholesome meals she had always had at midday in school, and her body suffered. She grew paler, with that anæmic look of the London girl, and her limbs were less round and firm. Futhermore, she fell easily into the snare of cheap lace and tawdry beads in which the older girls indulged, though those of her own age were still somewhat restricted to more serviceable clothes by their mothers. There were a good many mothers always coming and going to and from the theatre, looking after Poppie and Nellie and Gladys, and the Management cursed them even while allowing their necessity. A theatrical mother is a thing apart. She is like nothing else on earth, and her life seems to be divided between constructing food and clothes for her daughter out of piteous scraps and rating her like a troop-sergeant. Many of these women kept cheap lodging-houses, sometimes respectable, sometimes not. The associations of such homes made the children impudent and shrewdly independent — the inevitable consequences of the lives they led — while the mothers toiled and nagged. Beauty was glad on the whole that she owned no authority save Mrs. Summers's, the Dresser's, for that she could easily ignore; but she was quick to realize that her social position would have been improved by the possession of a

family. A girl who came from nowhere, and whom Edgar Allonby had taken out of the streets, it might be, had only the hall-mark of his approval for her warranty — and that was dubious, even at Allonby's. Of "Papa" himself she saw very little, as a matter of fact. After his first acceptance of her he took no notice of her existence, for between his immense importance and the mere cipher which Beauty represented there was a great gulf fixed. Once or twice in a chance meeting behind the scenes he spoke kindly to her, hoped she was working steadily and getting on all right — even made a little joke, "You're going to be leading lady some day — you must train for that, you know!" — for he was good-natured and good-humoured as a rule, save when the piece was not running well, or he had had ill-luck at billiards. Beauty did not expect more notice from him. She fell easily into her place, and was thankful to be on the salary list at his theatre rather than at the Satyr, where the girls were all "fasties" from fourteen upwards, or the Sovereignty, where they were underpaid and ill-housed. She had had enough of mankind to last her for several years of her life, and the mere licence of touch and freedom of look behind the scenes made her shrink, though she dared not pose as a prude. In one instance, however, her fastidiousness drove her into a direct appeal to "Papa" himself for redress, and her outrageous boldness was its own reward.

The first scene in which she and the other children made their appearance was that fantastic spectacle with Edna Carruthers as Fairy Queen, and the youthful chorus as her attendants in the arms of their ogres. Beauty was a light weight, but not so light as some

of the Lilliput Troupe. Her ogre was therefore chosen from the taller supers, and he chanced to be a person whose habits were uncleanly and his atmosphere not all that might have been desired. Beauty's instincts were fastidious, however careless she might be at times from tire and lack of supervision, and the clasp of the man's arms filled her with physical nausea and a loathing quite incomprehensible to most of the other children. They did not like "Drains," as the super was coarsely nicknamed amongst them, and they pitied Beauty, but that the actual contact was intolerable to her they could not understand. The man himself never guessed the extent of her repulsion or he might have been considerably mortified. He was on the whole good-looking rather than the reverse, and his experience of the world of Drury Lane, from which he came, led him to believe himself acceptable to its womenkind — who did not wash either. He had no vicious tendencies, and would have treated most of the children with kindly indifference; but Beauty's prettiness betrayed him into coarse teasing and attempted petting while she was in his arms, which met with absolutely no response and merely led him to regard her as rather stupid.

"I should slap his face, or pinch his dirty fat arms!" said Kitty viciously when Beauty complained in confidence. "The sauce! Fancy a man like Drains making up to one of US!" For the division of class is nowhere more strict than in the theatre, and the super, engaged for some exigency of the play, may hardly raise his eyes to those on the salary list. The children were "specials," too, but specials with

a difference. They had a scene to themselves, and sang in chorus, besides being on in one or two other curtains. The odorous ogre had committed an indiscretion in taking liberties with Beauty.

As a matter of fact she had been silent through physical disgust — a kind of paralysis of the temper. Twice she tried to get her ogre changed, with a callousness to some other child's endurance of him that was half self-preservation, and failing to accomplish it she looked about for rescue in a higher tribunal. It chanced that one evening between the acts she met Edgar Allonby on the stairs, coming from the comedian's dressing-room, where he had shed the light of his countenance for a few minutes. Beauty had come down to try and find Mr. Wentworth, from whom those in her dressing-room hoped some small indulgence, and had no business on the stairs at all. She certainly did not expect to see Allonby. He was on his way either to the front of the house or his own room, and she stood aside for him to pass her with the instinct of the serf to the overlord that never quite dies out, even in a chorus girl. Then she remembered her plight and stopped him.

"Mr. Allonby, might I ask you a favour? It's only a little one." The red lips parted slowly in a faint smile, for she was a little uncertain of her ground, and the blue eyes looked up confidingly as at her patron.

Allonby frowned slightly. He had learned to nip requests for favours in the bud, but he asked: "Well, what is it?" shortly enough, and stood still to hear.

"Could I have another super to go on with in our scene? It's the chorus of Miss Carruthers's fairy

song, where we come on with the ogres." Beauty spoke breathlessly, afraid that he would not have the patience to hear.

"Why? What's the matter with the super?" said the great Manager suspiciously. He expected a complaint of the man's advances to the girl, and was ready to tell her that it must be her own fault, for he objected to having it brought home to him that such things had threatened the children in his theatre, even though he knew it to be true in a few cases. Allonby was rather fond of asserting that his girls were well looked after, and no nonsense allowed with the younger ones, in contrast to such notorious houses as the Satyr or the Sovereignty. His glance at Beauty's raised face was not encouraging. "What complaint have you to make of the super? Who is he?" he said uncompromisingly.

"It's Seaton, Mr. Allonby, and — and — he's not clean! I can't bear him to touch me. He smells — ugh!" Beauty wrinkled up her straight little nose, and her lip lifted expressively. It was so little what Allonby expected that he burst out laughing.

"You little cat!" he said. "So he's offensive to your ladyship, is he? Well, I agree that it's not nice for you. I'll see what can be done."

He nodded at her, still laughing, and went on to tell the tale to his Stage-Manager and Secretary, who laughed in their turn. Allonby approved of the decencies of life amongst his girls, however, and considering that Beauty Darling had no mother to look after her he thought her objection rather creditable. He asked Sydney Hughes to look into the matter, with the result that the super Seaton got his notice,

for there were other things against him, and another man was engaged in his place, less physically offensive, but by no means cleaner-minded, as Beauty discovered on the first night of her introduction to him in the fairy scene. Her relief at the dismissal of Seaton, however, was so much beyond her power to express that she put up with the new man's moral discrepancies, and forebore to tell Kittie. It was *infra dig.* to be kissed by one of the supers behind the scenes, and so she avoided his blandishment off the stage, and ran away from him when he lay in wait for her at the stage-door. But she was beginning to find that her face was bringing her attention, even amongst the highest members of the Company, and began to take it as a matter of course — an egoism that saved her from serious downfall. Men in the theatre and men in the street were much of a muchness in her experience. Now and then they spoke to her without any further introduction than that they wished to look at her more closely; once or twice they tried to see her home; but she had learned a hard lesson at Trevor Guy's hands, and steered her way more safely, poor little damaged craft! than many a more perfect vessel in unknown seas of trouble.

Mrs. Summers lived at Peckham. Night after night Beauty was rolled out from Waterloo Bridge down South, leaving the more orderly streets away north-east, until the car joined the ringing, rolling volley of sound at the great Elephant and Castle centre, where at least five different lines cross and recross, and as many as seven cars are within the glance of an eye at once. The girls playing at some house in the Strand allowed an extra ten minutes for the

wonderful "centre" if they happened to change trams for some South suburb, and to those unaccustomed to the spider's web of lines the confusion was bewildering. One was hit with sound, and threatened with the rolling stock of the Companies before and behind, while the thunder of the trams ran on and into each other like the continuous fire of musketry; but Beauty slept through it many a night, her fair hair pillowed on the hard frame of the window, and her blue eyes only reluctantly opening when Mrs. Summers shook her by the arm with a "'Ere we are! Never saw such a girl — sleep! sleep! sleep! You'd sleep in the car all night if they'd let you, and not wake till the end of the first journey to-morrer!"

Mrs. Summers was inclined to be blear-eyed and facetious at one o'clock in the morning, when they got home. Her habits were not nice, but she had at least found a refuge for Beauty in the untidy attic over her own room. It was cold and shabby and not very clean, veritably under the roof of a dilapidated house in a dingy road off Rye Lane, and in consequence bitterly cold in winter. Beauty paid four shillings a week for the privilege of sleeping and dressing in this apartment, which was scandalous considering the accommodation received; but Peckham is handy for the trams, and the trams are handy for girls whose work lies in the centre of London. Therefore landladies know that they can charge rather more in proportion than the tenant of a house in Park Lane would expect to pay, and their wisdom is proved by the fact that they get what they ask. Beauty was glad at least that she had the privacy of her attic, and though she had some of her meals with Mrs. Summers, was inclined to

hold herself aloof from the Dresser in a small way. For Mrs. Darling had been a very sober woman, of that class of self-respecting poor who look upon such a calling as Mrs. Summers's as more beneath them than a duchess looks upon the wife of her tradesman. Beauty sniffed disdainfully and said "Gin!" on more than one occasion when her new chaperon stumbled into her own room and sat down on the bed with a vacant stare round her; but she was to find later on that the neighbourhood of that most volatile of spirits was not confined to the staff of a theatre — it was too familiar a drink in the dressing-rooms to retain its alien flavour for long. Such meals as the child did share with Mrs. Summers were provided by the landlady, and were just as cheap as the room was dear. They cost Beauty about three shillings a week, and were not exorbitant, for the poor can cater for themselves in such neighbourhoods more easily than the rich. Sunday is a great day in Peckham for buying a meat dinner, or vegetables to cook with it, and you make your choice from trays of pieces marked sixpence, fourpence, or even less; while the greengrocers' shops display generous counters of fruit and vegetables, piled up in divisions, and carefully guarded from marauding fingers by wire nettings, for the wares are mostly in the open air outside the shop. Sometimes Beauty herself would take her turn with the red-fisted working women and meagre children who crowded like animals at feeding time outside these barriers, and come home with her landlady's string-bag containing an assortment as varied as a co-operative store's. Her early training had made her a better

market-woman than a gentler nurtured girl, and, provided no one at the theatre knew it, she had no objection to reverting to old habits. She could, indeed, go shopping for other people better than for herself, for habit taught her that when she was given so much to spend she must make it do; but her own salary seemed to muddle itself away, so that she was often in advance of treasury, and had mortgaged her pound a week beforehand. Four shillings for rent, and three for food, as well as her tram fares, which never seemed to come to less than another three shillings, however much she tried to keep to the twopenny fares, did not leave much margin for the meals that had to be bought haphazard at the theatre and the innumerable small expenses that became necessities. Her washing she did for herself, as is usual with girls of her position, save that she really did it and many of them left it undone; but even in Peckham the finery after which she hankered was hopelessly out of reach.

Mrs. Summers was at least a keen-eyed guardian, even in her cups, and rarely allowed her charge to drift into chance acquaintances in the trams without such outspoken grumbling as made it not worth while to provoke her. She could not control the girl in reality, but she could protest, and her protests made Beauty feel ridiculous. It was many years before it occurred to Beauty that the Dresser had acted towards her like a rheumy old watch-dog, or to find an obscure reason in the importance of the man who had placed her in charge; but she knew dimly that her immaturity had been guarded for the possibilities of the future. Owing to Mrs. Summers, both in and out

of the theatre, she went unmolested when she might certainly have drifted into various intimacies, and therefore it was by a strange chance that she really did make a friend one night when she was going home. The car was full, and Mrs. Summers was obliged to take a seat near the door, while Beauty was squeezed in farther up the body of the vehicle. She so much resented being unable to lean her head against the framework behind her as usual and go to sleep, that she hardly noticed who her neighbours were until one or two of the passengers got out and left her more room. Then, with a sigh of relief, Beauty sat back in her seat and calmly prepared to drop off. The rattle of the car acted like a rough lullaby, but through it she was vaguely conscious of a nice voice speaking to her.

"If you lean against my shoulder, little girl, you could rest better. What makes you so tired?"

Beauty opened her heavy eyes a little and saw that the man next to her was of a better class than the people who usually filled the car, though his blue serge coat was shabby and stained and his shirt cuffs were frayed at the edges. He had a thin worn face, but his eyes were very much alive as they looked down at her.

"The show wasn't over till half-past eleven," murmured Beauty sleepily. "It makes it so beastly late getting home. We're on in the last scene — they might just as well let us off coming on in the final crowd — it means half an hour later —"

Her voice trailed off into silence, and she yawned. The young man turned towards her and deftly slipped his arm under her shoulders so that her head rested against him.

"The show!" he repeated wonderingly. "Surely you don't mean that you are on the stage!"

"Why not?" said Beauty crossly, for she was really tired. She closed her eyes, however, and rested very much more comfortably against the shabby coat and its wearer.

"You're such a baby — it seems impossible! You ought to be at school."

"I'm sixteen," said Beauty mendaciously, and still with her eyes shut. "On at Allonby's — been there a year." Another lie, for it was only six months since her interview with Edgar Allonby in his office; but she did not want inquiries as to whence she had come, and why, even from a stranger.

He did not speak for a minute, and then Beauty felt that he was stroking her curls, pulling the rich soft masses through his fingers gently. A good-humoured woman sitting next them looked round and said, "Your little sister's tired. She ought to be 'ome and to bed!" And he answered easily, "Yes, but it's not far off now." Then Beauty smiled a little.

Mrs. Summers was happily out of sight, buried beneath the passengers crowding to the end of the car; but Beauty knew she would reassert herself when they came to Rye Lane, and discover her. She roused herself a little after a while, and sat up. The young man bent nearer and spoke so that no one else could hear. It did not occur to her that this was in order not to destroy the illusion of their innocent relationship.

"What is your name, little girl, and where do you live?" he said kindly.

"Beauty Darling — I live with the Dresser from

Allonby's, 3, Pentonville Street — there she is, getting up now."

"Beauty!" he repeated, as if the significance of it pleased him. "Beauty Darling! You ought to be a very good girl, Beauty."

"Why?" she said, and there was a faint ridicule in her tone. Beauty had not found that the other girls at Allonby's — even Kittie Smart and the Lilliput Troupe — found it obligatory to be "very good."

"Because you've got such a beautiful face. You can't have an ugly mind and ways behind that face — they wouldn't match. Besides, God obviously meant you to live up to it — He set you your own standard every time you look in the glass!"

Beauty felt vaguely uncomfortable. It sounded moral, like a lecture, and she had always wriggled under lectures. She wriggled a little now, and said "Oh, go on!" with a faint laugh.

"I'm an artist," the young man said in quiet explanation. He wondered why Beauty suddenly shrank from him, and puzzled over the problem for long afterwards; but it was noticeable that with regard to the episode of Trevor Guy Beauty never confided in anyone. "My name is Michael Phayre," he went on. "I live at New Cross — but I'll get out here."

He left the car at Rye Lane when they did, and walked along the flaring pavement with them, leaving them at last at the end of their street. Mrs. Summers raised no objection for once. Perhaps the young man's unobtrusive manner was his best voucher, or perhaps, with the shrewdness of her kind, she knew that he belonged to some circle above her, despite the

frayed shirtcuffs. When he parted from them he lifted his cap and smiled.

"Miss Darling is very tired. I hope you haven't far to go," he said to Mrs. Summers.

"Oh, she'll be all righ'— she's young, her legs don' get sh' tired," said Mrs. Summers a trifle confusedly, and with a foolish smile. "Come on, Beau'y"— and she took the girl's arm, but more as if she craved support than offered it.

Beauty was sleepy still, and half exasperated. "Don't!" she said, shaking the woman off, so that Mrs. Summers nearly slipped and fell. It was Michael Phayre who put out his hand and caught her. There was a curious shadow of anxiety in his eyes as he watched the two figures disappear down the dark sordid street into the December night; but they rested with more concern on the girl.

Beauty grew used to meeting him in the tramcars, for he lived out at New Cross, as he had told her, and was attending some night classes in London. Like Beauty, Michael Phayre lived in an attic, but it was a very different type of room to hers, though it was his sole dwelling-place. I do not know how many hours or days he had spent before he found what he wanted in the way of a habitation within his means, and lodged himself and the few indispensable tools of his art in a large low garret under the eaves. The bottom half of the house was a tinware shop, but it was an old building, and for some obscure reason of the builders there was a skylight in the roof. Michael found some difficulty in keeping the room above freezing-point in winter in consequence; while in summer he

sometimes spent the gasping night with a pipe on the roof, since he could climb out of his skylight did he so please. But he had light, and even line and wash drawings for indifferent papers are the better for daylight to see by when at work on them. He lived chiefly on his contributions to illustrated journalism since he had given up a dubious position as drawing-master to a very private school in the neighbourhood, and at the time that he met Beauty Darling he was subsisting — for he did not live — on an income little more than hers and far more uncertain. He did his own cooking, however, on an oil stove, and had learned to shop even more wisely than she.

Life is varied in Peckham. There are residents who live in large old-fashioned houses with a drive to the front door, and coachhouses in the background. These are mostly doctors, in which the neighbourhood is more than common rich. But even houses rented at £45 a year have stabling. On the other hand, one cannot call a locality expensive in which one can get "good beds" for fivepence or clothes at a few shillings. Men's trousers ranged as low as 1s. 11d., braces could be had for fourpence, and boots for a shilling. Michael Phayre had often looked at the trousers, tied up in bunches and swinging free under the awning of the store, and wondered if he should ever wear them. But the speculation ended in a laughing shrug, since he rarely had 1s. 11d. to spend on clothes. He studied the people in the streets, however, and made drawings of them afterwards. His line drawings of the population of cheap neighbourhoods were amongst his most lucrative efforts, and found a readier market than the bold wash or watercolour that he

loved. They made the better classes to laugh, and Michael himself to weep.

Sometimes Beauty Darling did not see him for a week at a time, and then she almost forgot him; but when he turned up again the acquaintance slowly progressed. He would not come to the theatre, though she asked him. He had no desire to see her with paint on her face and in scanty clothes, he said, and Beauty retorted that if he were cheeky he might stay away. On the other hand, she flatly declined to be taken to the National Gallery to see pictures; she hated pictures, was all that she would admit, and indeed he found that she despised the profession of a painter to a puzzling degree. He thought it was simply ignorance, for Beauty never gave away that dark portion of her life in which Art had played as a grim fate. It was, however, with a natural dread of going where artists might be supposed to congregate that she shunned all picture galleries, and would never accompany Phayre to anything more pictorial than a cinematograph show. The young man did take her for a walk in one of the parks one afternoon, but he was not an escort to be proud of in his old stained blue serge, and Beauty yawned openly at his conversation, which seemed to her a little mad.

"Do look at those small fleecy clouds, Beauty," he said, pointing to the cold far sky above the tree-tops, instead of staring at other youths and maidens like themselves. "Some cherub has certainly lost his wings!"

"Oh, go on, Mr. Phayre!"

It was no better if the conversation took a more comprehensible turn. Beauty had gone so far as to

confide her unknown parentage to him, representing it with a glamour of the penny novelette upon it, and herself as the last scion of some graceless but high-born pair.

"You know, Mr. Phayre, my mother must have been a lady!"

"Then of course you feel that you must always be one yourself, Beauty!" said Michael serenely, with a kindly quizzical glance at the fair little face, unspoiled even by the stamp that Allonby's had already put upon it.

Beauty did not feel sure that she cared for Michael Phayre's point of view. It always seemed somehow to thrust obligations upon her that involved the harder virtues. How could one boast by such an admirer — if, indeed, he could be classed in the category at all. She fell back rather ruefully on the vague feeling that he was a gentleman, and even this she could not enforce upon her companions at the theatre, since they had never seen him. Despite his shabby coat — and Allonby's judged by the broadcloth standard — Beauty was sanguine that his atmosphere might make itself recognized, and it was another grievance that what small advantage she might have gained from his acquaintance was denied to her in the eyes of the other girls in her dressing-room.

"Beauty's got a best boy!" said the "Children's Chorus" with a giggle. "You might have him round at tea-time, Beauty!" For it sometimes happened that on rehearsal days several of the younger girls would get out to tea at a bun-shop near Allonby's, and then there were generally assignations — harmless enough at present — and much giggling.

"He won't come," said Beauty indifferently. "Says he'd rather come out alone with me, and doesn't want a crowd. But he talks awful rot when he does. *I* think he's soft!"

The Lilliput Troupe laughed unanimously, and it sounded like the splash of escaping water, for the conversation was taking place in the wings before the children were marshalled on to the stage for Miss Edna Carruthers's fairy song. The leading lady herself looked round and said "Sh-sh!" but her eyes instinctively sought for and found the child who had a "best boy" and despised him — it was a mental attitude she knew so well herself. There was a silent laugh on her own lips as her eyes fell on Beauty, half sullen in retrospect, her mutinous red mouth downdrawn over the unpalatable things that Phayre had said to her. Miss Carruthers was sufficiently amused by the incident to repeat it at the Savoy later on, when she was having supper with a respected Member of Parliament, a Satyr girl, and an extra man. The cast at Allonby's did not as a rule chum with the Satyr girls; there is class and class, and the Satyr girls were "fasties," as even the children knew, while the Allonby girls worked honestly, if mistakenly, to get to the top of the tree in Musical Comedy. But Miss Carruthers was sufficiently lifted above the heads of the crowd to be above class prejudice. As leading lady at Allonby's it behoved her to meet Baby Sinclair, who was her rival at the Satyr, so long as that young person did not obviously stick her tongue in her cheek. Miss Carruthers told the incident of Beauty and her boy with relish.

"One of our kids," she said, "was being ragged by

the rest of the flock about her best boy. And she put her little nose in the air and said he talked awful rot at best — she thought he was soft! You should just have heard her! I don't know what the kiddies are coming to."

"But was she really a kid, or only goin' it with her hair down her back?" asked the extra man doubtfully, as soon as Miss Sinclair's screams of laughter would allow him.

"Oh, really a kid — she doesn't look above thirteen or fourteen," said Miss Carruthers, with as shrewd a guess at Beauty's real age as Edgar Allonby had made. "Sweetly pretty. She'll probably go on the Halls by and by, on account of her face."

"What is her name?" asked the M. P. with idle curiosity. Perhaps he wondered, as he sipped his champagne in defiance of the doctor, whether the sweetly pretty child would in some future drift to Savoy suppers "on account of her face," and perhaps sit at this very table — but it was more probable that he was thinking that Heidsieck, 1900, was a very sound wine.

"She is called Beauty Darling —"

"Rippin'!" broke in Miss Barbara Sinclair with a loud laugh. "She ought to come to us, Miss Carruthers — she's wasted on Allonby's. A pretty face and a catchy name — that's all we want at the Satyr. How she'd fetch the boys — Beauty Darling!"

And that was the first time that Beauty's name was spoken at the Savoy.

Beauty herself rather liked the Satyr girls, a few of whom came now and then to see friends "behind" at Allonby's. They were noisy young ladies, but

good-natured, and their unbridled speech was full of explanation to Beauty, a trifle bewildered still by the suddenness of her London life, even after a year. They were "fasties" of course, and Allonby's rather prided itself upon its morals; but they did seem to have a good time, and to lunch and sup out every day, besides being most fearfully and wonderfully dressed. Edgar Allonby once defined the difference between his own theatre and the Satyr as the "tone of a school."

"It's something in tradition," he said. "You get a different type of girl at the Satyr. The Management can't prevent their going out to lunch and supper there, and other damned nonsense. Whereas if my girls will work, there's nothing to prevent them getting to the top of the tree. They need only have a pretty face at the Satyr — we want voices and some training at Allonby's."

Which statement may be accepted with reservation, but it was certainly due to this distinction and her connexion with Allonby's that Beauty Darling ever gained the training that she had. Had she happened to get taken on at the Satyr in the first place, it is fairly certain that she would have learned just so much as enabled her to display her legs and smile at the gallery; but she would have remained in the chorus for ever. At Allonby's she was forced to work, and the ambition of getting "into the bill" was instinctively before her mental eyes throughout her novitiate. Sometimes when she was very tired — too tired to be clean or tidy at night — or Mrs. Summers was particularly sodden with spirits, it might well have been that she regretted the small room that Mrs. Darling grimly supervised, and the law and order and fair

dealing of her school-life — even the hard discipline of her foster-mother herself, in place of the slipshod nagging of the Dresser. But if her body and her instincts rebelled, her mind did not, nor would she have gone back to the life that had grown monotonous through use. For in youth any change is for the better.

CHAPTER V

THERE was a good deal of noise going on in No. 6 dressing-room when Mrs. Summers brought up the hot water for tea, for two of the younger girls were having a joy-fight over the back of an old sofa, and Our Fannie of the Lilliput Troupe, who was always a little excitable, began to scream from the sheer love of noise. Our Kittie and Beauty Darling, sitting side by side at their own dressing-table, were knocked over in the scrimmage, and swore like drummer-boys. For Mr. Hughes's vocabulary had naturally been adopted by his Company, girls as well as men. If you are constantly sworn at, at rehearsal, you are bound to swear in your turn, since there is nothing more infectious than example.

This largest and highest of the dressing-rooms at Allonby's was supposed to accommodate ten or twelve girls — as a matter of fact it had sometimes held twenty or thirty of the big casts which were necessary for the elaborate productions — and was packed away at the top of the theatre, that its noise and disquiet might not disturb the privacy of the principals, who were much nearer the stage. Allonby's was like a small town behind the scenes, with its vast cellarage for the storage of scenery, and its equal areas of dressing-rooms, rehearsal-rooms, offices, etc. There should have been space enough for the noise in No. 6 to lose itself in empty air before it reached the higher grades

of the Company. Nevertheless the commotion had made itself felt, as Mrs. Summers promptly explained to No. 6 — or, as she herself put it, "Let 'em 'ave it, 'eavens 'ard!" her similes being mixed metaphors of vituperation and atmospheric phenomena.

"Well, I never 'eard — Miss Carlos, you shut up that noise! Mr. Jester 'as the room below and 'e's going to report you to Mr. Hughes. I'm come up to know what *is* going on! There's 'alf the theatre going to make a deputation to the Management and 'ave you turned off — there *is!* Now don't you go running into me, you Kittie — I'll let you 'ave this boiling water over your impudent legs if you do! — And don't you use such language, Beauty Darling, before little girls younger than yourself. I should think you'd be ashamed! You'll all get sacked at treasury if this goes on."

Treasury is on Friday, when salaries are paid and notices given if anyone is to be dismissed. Mrs. Summers's breathless harangue caused a minute's lull, but Our Fannie's hysterical spirits were not to be damped. She pretended to faint at the threats, and with a "Catch me, darling! Oh Bertie, I'm going!" [1] fell into Our Kittie's arms with such effect that they both went down together and nearly brought Mrs. Summers down too. Beauty caught and saved the kettle, with an eye to tea, but Poppie Gurney — Our Poppie — seized Mrs. Summers round the waist and waltzed her off down the long room, depositing her breathless in a corner.

"There, ole dear! that's what comes of raiding No.

[1] This was a phrase of a popular song of the day — "Oh Bertie, I'm going — I'm going to the," etc.

6! — oh my breeches! Ain't somebody going to make tea?"

It was Matinée day, and no chance to get out to a tea-shop, so the different dressing-rooms had their separate trays, and very often their own tea-things and tea. Spirit stoves were not allowed at Allonby's, so the kettles had to be boiled on the dressing-room fires — poor little fires enough in the less important rooms, and in No. 6 hardly capable of warming one end of the barn-like place. But to save time those who were friendly with the stage-doorkeeper got him to heat the water first in the office, he being the proud possessor of a large and open grate. He had been boiling his kettle the first time that Beauty had ever seen that stage-door, but on that occasion for his own accommodation.

Most of the principals made tea into a cosy little affair on Matinée days, and invited each other, or had friends from outside smuggled in; though it not infrequently happened that the voice of the call-boy warned the party that a cue was imminent, and the hostess would rush away to flirt with the villain or the Comedian to inform the audience that "Jolly Jane Jaggers was a jujube joy!"— from which assurance they seemed to derive much satisfaction — returning for a second cup while other members of the cast took their places. Even in No. 6 the girls subscribed a few pence each to have a cake or buns on Matinée days, and took it in turn to provide sweets. This was one of the small expenses that made havoc of Beauty's pound a week, but the obligation of her position as a young lady on Allonby's salary list made it incumbent on her. There was a long wait for the "Chil-

dren's Chorus" about four o'clock, when Miss Carruthers's fairy song was over and the "grand finale, and every one on" had not arrived. It was those long waits that led to the appalling noise of which the lower dressing-rooms complained, for shut ten or twelve girls of from thirteen to sixteen up together with nothing to do, and it is odds that somebody does not begin to find herself too big for the room.

"I don't believe little Jester will split on us!" said Poppie loudly, as she left Mrs. Summers puffing and blowing, and made a dive for the cupboard where the teapot lived. "I'll go down and give him a kiss for his own filthy little self to pacify him!"

"You'll blooming well drive him to it if you do! Jesty isn't taking any with Us. He's casting sheep's eyes at Carruthers." This from Our Fannie.

"Do let Summers get her breath and tell us if there really *is* going to be a report—" Kittie Smart cut in sharply. "You were making a holy row just now, Nellie, and Fannie squeaks like a weasel."

Here somebody set up a new version of an old song, and "Pop! pop! pop! goes the weasel!" resounded on all sides. A girl named Gertie Grierson, who could reproduce sounds like the drawing of corks, was in great request, and started her accomplishment at once, jumping round the room like a frog, followed by five other girls all singing louder than they did for Mr. Hughes's worst invectives. Mrs. Summers stamped her foot in useless rage.

"You little fools! You're cutting your own throats. Mr. Jester *'as* complained, I tell you, and so 'as Miss Cateret."

There was a new chorus.

"Cateret doesn't dress on the floor beneath"—"Unless she was in Jester's dressing-room"—"That's it, the dirty swine — and then they want to foul us!"—"They'd better clean their own sty first"—"Well, *let* them complain! They've got to explain how Cateret heard, and where she was, anyhow."

Our Kittie, always the executive member of the party, started this defence. It forced a breathing space and hushed the twelve voices, into which silence Mrs. Summers incontinently rushed, seizing her chance.

"That's none of your business, I should think, Miss Smart. What is, is that when the run's over you won't be on in the new piece. Mark my words! Mr. Hughes is as angry as 'e can be."

There was a fresh outburst. "Who cares for old Hughes?"—"Let him be stuffy!"—"He's the stuffiest of all stuffy stage-managers! — Stuff! stuff! stuff!"

And then the young voices broke into chorus again by common consent, this time of a music-hall song —

"We're all waiting for the stuff-stuff! —
Come along! Send him on! — the nine-fifteen!
Rolling up the Supers with his stuff! stuff! stuff! —
Stuffy! Where the devil have you been?"

(Needless to say the original ditty is "Puff! Puff!" and refers to a railway strike.)

"Much we care for old Hughes," said Poppie recklessly. "It's Papa who bosses the salary list."

"It's going to be Mr. Hughes this time," said Mrs. Summers with a grim triumph. "Mr. Allonby is going to take a holiday. 'E's ill."

"I don't believe it!"

"Summers, where did you hear that?"

"I say, it will be *hell* if Hughes really does engage for the new piece!"

"Papa was all right on Friday. I met him in the wings. He was with Carruthers, as chirpy as a cricket, the ole dear!"

"Well, 'e's down with influenza, or something," said Mrs. Summers shortly, picking up the kettle and beating a retreat with it. "I just 'eard from 'Ollis" (the stage-doorkeeper) "'e's not coming 'ere for a long time, and Mr. Hughes is going to be boss. And you're all on the black list," she added as she banged the door after her.

Tea was rather a depressed function for a few minutes. If what Summers said was true, and Syddie Hughes had a say in casting the next piece, the occupants of No. 6 were not so certain of favour as if Edgar Allonby himself were in supreme authority as usual. The younger girls were not popular with Hughes, on account of their natural tendency to unruliness. He made less allowance for them than the experienced, broader-minded "Papa," who, besides, was not so often in contact with their uproarious spirits. Hughes had many small grievances against No. 6 dressing-room; he was overworked and often worried with the control of the big cast, and he disliked handling children's choruses, even though he had nothing to do with their actual training — Miss Praed and the Musical Director did that. Few audiences realize what the production of a modern Musical Comedy means, with its elaborate schemes of colour, its concerted music, its special "turns," its drilled masses of people

to move on the stage. There were half-a-dozen different authorities for the different departments, all woven together under the guiding hand of the Stage-Manager. Edgar Allonby was usually his own producer — a position very different to that of Manager, Stage-Manager, or Business Manager. But if he were really invalided, and Sydney Hughes were obliged to produce and stage-manage too, the girls foresaw trouble. Apart from this, there was really a genuine feeling for "Papa," whose qualities were those that had endeared him to his Companies, and an honest regret if he were to be laid up. No wonder that less cake was eaten than usual, and that a last drain of coloured water was left in the teapot!

Before this unusual finale, however, a warning had come to No. 6 that a few of their number were wanted in the ball scene. Amongst them was Beauty Darling, whose voice had improved under training, and who was advanced to singing in several choruses. She had now really been nearly twelve months at Allonby's, and was in her sixteenth year; but the piece that had run so successfully for two years was nearing its close, and would be withdrawn at the end of the season, and a new one put into rehearsal. The chorus knew that the principals had already been "cast," though alterations might take place in the distribution of parts; but for themselves they had not worried at present, as the great bulk of the performance was not yet finally settled. Voices would be tried, of course, before the re-engagements, and there might be some weeding out; but Allonby's had a reputation for keeping its people — unlike the Sovereignty, which would advertize for thirty new girls at the end of a

run, and take them on in place of older hands, particularly if premiums came with them, though from some very doubtful source. Mrs. Summers's announcement was the first shadow of doubt that had fallen on those of the chorus who had been on Allonby's salary list for some time.

Beauty Darling was the last to leave the dressing-room, in the wake of six of her comrades. An inevitable vanity made her turn to the glass for a last look at her vivid face under the gipsy cap of bright scarlet and gold coins — the dress was a stage Bohemian's — and what she saw pleased her.

"Keep me a scrap of cake — I haven't finished," she said hastily to Kittie, turning away at last. "We're only on for ten minutes."

"All right — but you'll be late, Beauty — do cut and run!"

Kitty spoke anxiously, her active mind already at work on Hughes's future power of retaliation and Summers's warning.

"Now, ladies, ladies! Miss Darling, you're asked for!"

Beauty did run, but the other girls had gone on ahead; and in the doorway leading to the wings she encountered the Stage-Manager.

"Now, Miss Darling, go on, please! You're late!" he said sharply, with a glance that was certainly not approval over her shining hair and small bright figure.

But for that last glance in the glass Beauty might have been wise; but it seemed an outrage that a man's eyes could fall on her and not endorse the approval she herself had felt. She lifted her scornful chin — the most expressive feature she possessed — and

looked at Hughes under her level brows, tossing back the glory of her curls.

"They don't seem to have rung down!" she said insolently. "I dare say I shall come in for the call!"

"Damn it, that's not your business!" said the Manager, swinging round in a sudden fury. This child's impertinence was the last straw on a back nearly broken by overweight of responsibility. "You will be in your place at the cue, or you'll get your notice. I won't have anyone at Allonby's who is not punctual. You will be fined anyway."

Beauty slipped past him, very angry and rather frightened. But she did not take the incident seriously until Mrs. Summers's news was confirmed — Edgar Allonby was really ill, with appendicitis and not influenza, and was to undergo an operation immediately. It was not likely that he would be seen at the theatre for many weeks, and in the meantime Hughes was to arrange such details of the cast as had been left open, and to take the first rehearsals in conjunction with a producer engaged by Allonby. It was hoped that "Papa" would be about again in time to see to the final polishing before the piece began its run.

Beauty wished that she had been a little more discreet with regard to the omnipotent Stage-Manager, and had not trusted so much to Allonby's original interest in her. She wished it more in a week or so when the cast was finally filled up, and she was told that her services were not required in the new production, though her name and address were noted in case there should be something to offer her "later on." Most of the extra girls in the Children's Chorus had been re-

engaged, and it was only their pantomime engagements that prevented the Lilliput Troupe from remaining; Beauty Darling's "getting the push" was, therefore, the more marked, and she felt it keenly. If Allonby had been at hand it might not have happened, though Beauty would certainly have found herself in disgrace for her impertinence to the Stage-Manager, and have got a "dressing down" from one or other of the authorities; but Allonby was a shrewd man, and never forgot the merest cipher of his company who had excited his interest. He being beyond reach of appeal, however, Beauty found herself thrown out of the means of earning her living, and not even with a chance of touring with the discarded piece, for Hughes had the final voice in selecting the provincial companies as well.

The taking her name and address was a mere form, as Beauty soon learned, and out of sight was conveniently out of mind. For the first time the extreme consequences of her independence in running away from the roof that sheltered her, and the food regularly provided, were brought home to the girl. She did not by any means think of returning to Wandlebridge or asking shelter: that was a last strait that had not even dawned on her comprehension. But she felt very blank, and much more as if cut adrift than she had in the excitement and terror of her first plunge into the world. There had been the novelty and sense of adventure to keep her spirits up then, and the very real shock and horror of the night before had in some sort made the severance easy, or at least imperative. During the past year, curiously enough, she had come to regard Allonby's as her home,

and become much more dependent upon the theatre than she had been on Mrs. Darling's cottage. To be exiled from the familiar sights and sounds and smells seemed impossible to realize, but there was no chance of appeal to any other authority. The Management was sufficiently upset and disorganized by Allonby's absence in the crisis of a new piece to be produced, to make it intolerant of any minor worries. A protest from one of the chorus that might at least have met with a hearing at other times would now be peremptorily dismissed.

On the Friday after which she received her notice Beauty went to the Theatrical Ladies' Working Guild in absolute depression of spirits. She had been introduced to this institution in the first place by Kittie Smart soon after she first went on at Allonby's, for the Lilliput Troupe were all of them "Mrs. Carson's girls" in the days when that most kindly lady gathered all classes of the Profession around her in the large, bare room in Russell Street, Covent Garden. Beauty was a fairly constant worker, not only out of gratitude — for the Guild had practically clothed her since her few clothes had worn out — but because she liked work and liked the atmosphere of the cheerful place where everybody chattered and stitched and had tea for the large sum of twopence. The best-known actresses on the English stage would sometimes take — and do still take — the chair at the Guild afternoons, and, sitting at the head of the table, would talk to the members of the Committee (who usually sat next to them) and bite off their cotton in a perfectly human manner, while the general buzz of conversation ran on undisturbed from three to five o'clock,

punctuated by demands for "Something else to do, please," or "What *is* this garment? How am I supposed to make it up?"

Beauty had always been clever with her fingers, and had she had a little more educated taste or a suggestion to follow, could have altered her own clothes so that they would have fitted and suited her, however they began life originally. For she was largely imitative, and her ideal was at present confined to the appearance of the stars of Allonby's, or those well-known Musical Comedy ladies whom she saw at the Guild. Both were beyond her compass, but she faithfully imitated in cheap materials whenever possible, especially the exaggerations. Now, the clothes for disposal at the Guild (and God knows what distress they have not relieved!) are chiefly those made on Friday afternoons for maternity cases, and a certain amount of strong underclothing; but since the Committee plead also for "any old things the better off amongst the members can spare — *rags,* if you like!" — there is a most wonderful second-hand department which not only supplies those who have to "dress" their own parts on third-rate tours, but actually clothes the very poorest of the profession — the poor Mummers who are still to be seen in booths at country fairs, or those who must be respectably dressed somehow if they are to obtain engagements and have literally no resources. The most wonderful resurrections take place out of old scraps of lace and flowers that your kitchen-maid, dear madam, would pronounce "done for"; and when you take mental notes of an exquisite creation worn by Miss So-and-so in such-and-such a new drama, you may remember with amazement that there is an-

other end to THE PROFESSION in whose depths have sunk people struggling to cover their overworked bodies, and thankful for anything that will at least look decent on the outside.

Into this class came Beauty Darling with her imperative necessities, explained by Our Kittie as an applicant who had no mother even to stitch for her, and was trying to earn for herself as a respectable citizen and live on a pound a week. They were very good to her at the Guild — they always are. Even the members' subscription of a shilling a year was not demanded from her for that first year at any rate, and when anything prettier or more suitable to her than usual happened to come in, it was set aside, even though she had not begged of late.

As soon as she could afford it, of course, the girl spent money on impossible blouses and strings of beads; but she got frightened if she found herself running into debt, and the enforced neatness of her schooldays kept her somewhat within bounds. At the Guild she was just a common little girl dressed in a stained and faded coat and skirt, a cotton blouse without a collar — and with an exquisite face. People liked to look at her sitting at the same table, her busy hands at work on the coarse baby-linen over which her curls fell, while her equally busy lips carried on a low babble with the girl next to her — it was perhaps as well for the illusion that the good-hearted women at the other end of the theatrical ladder could not always follow what those dewy red lips were saying. Yet Beauty was on these occasions a well-behaved child, with a decent pronunciation of English, for she unconsciously dropped back into the school

language and the school manner in the cleaner atmosphere around her. At the theatre she was louder, coarser voiced, and far more vulgar than she would ever have been in her foster-mother's cottage.

On this particular Friday, however, Beauty was so far depressed that she did not trouble to find a seat near some one that she knew, but sat down at the end of a table where a pretty Musical Comedy actress was taking the chair, and began to sew without a word to anybody. One or two older women looked at her and smiled covertly as they might at the picture of a child, or a rose-tree, or any other lovely and innocent thing; though Beauty was not dressed for the part. It happened to be the fashion just then to wear hats modelled on a Chinese mandarin's — broad-brimmed flat hats, with a petticoat of lace resembling a lamp-shade. In Bond Street these hats were models of artistic triumph; but they were unfortunately popular and easy of imitation, so that they floated down through many grades, until in such hands as Beauty's, they assumed the appearance of an immense dressing-table with a rather soiled garniture depending from it. Underneath the hateful lace Beauty's fringed blue eyes sometimes rewarded the spectator by an upward glance as she asked for the loan of scissors or cotton.

She had not been working long when Kittie Smart herself entered and took the seat next to her. Beauty had not known that Kittie was coming to-day, but she was glad of the chance of discussing the changes at Allonby's with her, away from the theatre.

"Papa's losing a lot of his old girls," remarked Kittie, as she threaded her needle. "You're going and Gertie Grierson's married — oh, hadn't you

heard? Yes, she was the oldest of our lot, you know — nineteen, and she married Toddy Bute, the Business Manager at the Temple Bar, and they've gone out with a crowd in 'Rock the Cradle.'"

"Not their own?" said Beauty, staring with all her blue eyes.

"Not half! Toddy was a good little sort, but he hadn't any money. It's Gills and Gillett's crowd. She left soon after you."

"We're leaving, too," went on Kittie in the pause. "All the Troupe are going to Dublin for the Panto. You know we had a Panto engagement this winter but Hughes wanted us to start in the new piece. There isn't much for us to do in it, though, and we've been thinking of making a change for some time."

"Panto!" said Beauty, coming out of the reverie into which the news about Gertie Grierson had plunged her. "Isn't it rather — rough?"

"Not if you're a Special. The Troupe have their own dances, and stick together. We needn't herd with the Knockabouts or the Supers. And the pay's awfully good — we're getting two pounds each."

Beauty meditated. She had never been in Pantomime, and had avoided going on tour because all the London girls said that it was so hard to get back again. Tour was supposed to be rather fun, especially if you went to the No. 1 towns — Manchester and Liverpool, Birmingham and Brighton — which sometimes had the London Companies themselves; but Beauty had always understood that the annual Pantomimes in the same towns were recruited by some very queer characters as well as the stars whose names appeared in big letters on the hoardings. Even

the great attractions, such as the contortionists and acrobats who played the parts of animals, were not remarkable for sobriety or politeness when out of their skins, and as to the "special turn" people from the music-halls, they were pronounced "a holy terror" by anyone who had done Pantomime work. Nevertheless the money sounded attractive, for if a girl as young as Kittie Smart, and one of a troupe, got two pounds a week, Beauty might herself hope to do the same.

"Who's sending it out?" she asked.

"Bent and Bent. Don't you know Val Bent, the Agent? If you like to come round with me to-morrow morning I'll introduce you. I wish you would come, too, Beauty! It would be twice as jolly if we could get some decent girls to join."

"Perhaps they've settled," said Beauty uncertainly. She was always rather timid about taking a new step, and Pantomime was a leap in the dark.

"No, I'm sure they want people still, though they've got all their principals. You ought to get chorus easily, and an understudy."

Beauty met Kittie in Maiden Lane next day, and was conducted by her up a dark and carpetless staircase and into a large room whose permanent furniture seemed to consist of a chair and a small table, on which was a Remington typewriter worked by a youth with a spotted face and a familiar manner. There were very few other resting-places in the room, but it was full of people of all ages and both sexes, sitting on anything they could accommodate themselves to, and when there was not even a narrow window sill or coal scuttle, standing about limp and

weary. The prevailing type of woman was very golden as to hair, pink as to cheeks, and bistred round the eyes; and the men were correspondingly unwholesome without the paint. Nothing in this world resembles the unsuccessful Actor at twelve o'clock in the day except himself, and simile is useless. He must be seen to be believed in.

When Beauty and Kittie entered, the youth at the typewriter was just dealing with an importunate lady who had been there since ten, and had grown unwise through desperation.

"Can't I see Mr. Bent for one minute? I only want to hear from him—"

"You'll see him in your turn. When he's disengaged. He won't see anyone now," said the clerk rudely. He patted another girl on the shoulder and added something in a confidential tone, as one who was on intimate terms with the whole Profession; but the girl only giggled and allowed the familiarity. She did not want to spoil her chance of getting into that inner room where Val Bent was alternately dealing out despair and salaries ranging from one pound to three-ten a week.

"That chap's too cheeky!" said Kittie below her breath to Beauty. "I'd like to see him try that on with me!" She walked over to the typewriter and spoke with an insolence of authority at least equal to the spotted youth's. "Will you tell Mr. Bent I am waiting to see him? Miss Smart, of the Lilliput Troupe. We're engaged for Dublin, and I have to ask him one or two questions."

The youth got up with sudden compliance and a little added respect. "All right, Miss Smart — but

I don't think he'll see you just now. He's got Mr. Henneage with him —"

But just at that moment the door opened, and a man with a complexion like a tallow candle and well-greased hair came through the crowd of waiting applicants. One or two spoke to him effusively, for he was a well-known Comedian — a "London Man," as the saying goes, whose false nose and purple trousers were dear to the hearts of the foyer in certain music-halls. As Mr. Henneage left, the spotted youth slipped into the inner sanctuary, emerging again to beckon Kittie in, and with Beauty hard on her heels the girl pushed through the crowd of jealous or wistful faces and into the office where Mr. Val Bent was engaging people for Dublin.

"How do you do, Mr. Bent?" said Kittie coolly. "This is my friend, Miss Darling. She's playing at Allonby's, but she might come with us if there's anything open." Not a word about her own engagement or the arrangements she had said she must make! Kittie knew too much to take up an Agent's time.

Mr. Bent was a tall man in a frock-coat, with a crimson tie. Beauty thought he was a gentleman, which shows that her education even in appearance was still incomplete. But as he had really shaved that morning and wore a clean collar, there was some excuse for her eyes, which were still bewildered by the next room. He looked her up and down, and hummed and hawed as only an Agent could, tipping his chair back at a reckless angle, and appearing as if he really did not know that fifty overstrained men and women were waiting a few feet away to know if

he could grant them the right to earn their bread and butter for a few months at least.

"There's very little left," he said, with a slight smile. "Very little. What's your line, dear?"

"Singing," said Beauty.

"There's not much in the chorus — all the special turns are filled," he said. "Can you dance?"

"Yes, but I'd rather sing," said Beauty. She could not really dance — not as the Lilliput Troupe did, with trained muscles and the ease of hard work. Beauty had taken her turn in the dances at Allonby's and picked up a few steps and the right movements; but she was never really a dancer and rather disliked it. Her voice was her strong point, if one excepted her face.

"I'm afraid I can't offer you the singing chorus," said Bent. "But there is Cupid open in the Pageant of Love at the end and a nymph in the woodland scene."

"Can't you give her an understudy?" asked Kittie quickly.

"Yes, she can understudy Dandini." (The Pantomime was "Cinderella.")

"What are the terms?" asked Beauty dubiously. She foresaw that Cupid's costume would be an airy one, and the time of year was the coldest and big theatres always draughty. Mr. Bent saw her wavering, and put up the salary five shillings. He had never seen a better face for Cupid as a matter of fact, and had been a little put to it to fill the part.

"I'll give you two pounds five," he said, "but you mustn't tell the other girls!" he added, laughing.

"And how long do we rehearse?" Kittie cut in, for this touched her as well as Beauty.

"Three weeks."

"We shall pawn everything we've got!" said Kittie, and Beauty's face fell. It was not easy to save on her present salary so as to live for three weeks without any at all.

"You'll be able to get it back out of the matinées," said Bent carelessly. "Well, Miss Darling?"

"Yes, I'll go," said Beauty, carried away by the extra five shillings. Mr. Bent smiled. He was beginning to think that he might have got a bargain. But he shook hands with the girls with his best imitation manner, and let them out at another door on to the bare staircase, that their exit should not raise too many hopes of seeing him in the people still waiting, hungry and tired, in the next room. For it was near Mr. Bent's luncheon-hour, and he had no intention of waiting for *his* meals.

Kittie seized Beauty excitedly by the arm as they emerged into Maiden Lane again. "That's better than we hoped, Beauty!" she said. "You've topped us. I didn't think Val would offer you more than two pounds. Won't it be jolly being together again?"

"I wouldn't have gone if you hadn't been going," said Beauty. "I say, Kit, let's go into a cafe and have something to eat. I'm starved!" (You must please pronounce café as if it were written kaif. On the Stage it is considered extremely witty to distort known words to their literal spelling.)

So they had hot milk, for it was a cold day in October, and jam-roll, and Beauty found herself com-

mitted to a new venture which might be successful or no. She had no experience in managing the expenses of rooms on tour, but at least Dublin would be a permanency, and she would not find that she had ordered too much food and must leave it behind her in moving on week by week, or have to borrow from her landlady to pay the porter who brought her boxes from the station, "till treasury night." The two drawbacks were the Agent's fees, for which she had not calculated, and which were heavy — 10 per cent. on the first fortnight and five throughout the tour; and the three weeks of rehearsal which the whole cast had to give without salary — for try as she might she had only saved two pounds by the time she was bound to leave London for Ireland. The Allonby Management could fill her place over and over again with girls who would come in with a premium, so that when she came back she would have to look out for fresh work. However, she meant to save in Dublin. That two pounds five looked a monstrous sum seen at a distance and in comparison with her thirty shillings.

Michael Phayre came to see her off in the early hours of that hideous, raw morning at Euston. He was the only friend she had there, outside the Company, and the sight of his kind, worn face was more welcome than it had ever been before. Beauty felt strange and forlorn, even with the Lilliput Troupe chattering all round her, and she clung to Michael with a trembling underlip like a child's.

"Why, Beauty!" he said, and his own voice was not quite steady. "If you cry I shall take it as a personal compliment, and think it is parting from me

that has upset you! Think what a swelled head I shall get!"

"I wish you were coming too, Mr. Phayre," Beauty said miserably. "I wish I weren't going — I know it's going to be horrid!"

He looked down at her quickly, and his delicate mouth contracted. It had never occurred to Beauty to speculate as to his age, but she always regarded him as so much her senior as to be bordering upon the thirties. It is quite possible that at this time he was fully twenty-five.

"Well, if it is horrid, and you find you can't bear it, you must write to me, and we will see if we can't get you back. Only, what are you going to do when you get here, you poor waif?" he added, more to himself than her.

"Oh, go back to one of the Musical Comedy houses, I suppose," said Beauty with the bliss of ignorance. For she had not yet experienced the horror of being really "out" and the difficulty of getting in again. Perhaps Michael Phayre's experiences with unsold canvases made him more pessimistic than she.

"At all events, we will hope it won't come to that," he said gently. "Have a good time, and try to grow a little, inside as well as out, Beauty."

That was one of his queer speeches, and Beauty laughed tremulously in the midst of her tears.

"You do say silly things, Mr. Phayre! The idea! You'd make a girl laugh in her coffin."

"I hope not," said Michael quietly. "But you have a mind, childie, if you would only use it. Do read something now and then, Beauty, if it's only the newspapers — you are a little citizen, and you ought to

know what is going on in your country outside the narrow world behind the footlights."

"Oh, I can't bother with politics and things!" said Beauty uneasily, but as invariably happened to her when anyone made a suggestion she decided to buy the "Daily Mail" instead of "Home Chat," as she had intended, to look at on the journey.

"Nobody could talk about it even if I did know what the Government was doing," she added honestly, some flash from her schooldays coming back across her mind when even the younger children were encouraged by the dauntless head mistress to understand what party was in and the meaning of the measures before Parliament.

"No, I suppose they only know what is going on from the allusions in the topical songs!" said Michael, with a wry smile. "What *do* they talk about, Beauty?"

"Oh, I don't know! What's doing in our world, you know, and what's going out, and who's in it."

"Good Lord!" said Michael softly. "No wonder they are one-idead. They eat Stage and drink Stage and breathe Stage. They talk of nothing else and know nothing else. Perhaps that accounts for the faces."

He turned his far-seeing artist's eyes on the crowd thronging the platform and pushing their way into the special that was marked "Cinderella Pantomime Co." There is always something a little abnormal in a Stage face if it is likely to be successful as seen across the footlights. The prettiness of the girls hurt Michael to look at, it was so insistent; the exaggerated features of the men seemed to hit him in

the face. All of them were speaking and living in italics, and it appeared to have impressed their physical appearance also. He turned back with relief to Beauty, though her curls were combed more over her eyes, and her cheap fur toque was pushed further to the back of her head than when he had first known her.

"Don't try to accentuate yourself," he said to her rather suddenly. "You are quite pretty enough to do without it.—I've brought you a Christmas present before the time, to keep you warm on the journey."

She had not noticed that he carried something dark hung over his arm, thinking that it was her own travelling rug, if anything, a cheap one that she had bought second-hand from another girl, and which he had taken from her at once when he arrived. But her rug, she remembered now, was lying on her seat in the carriage which she was to share with the Lilliput Troupe, and Michael's gift was a dark golf-cloak, lined with scarlet, that he folded over her shoulders at once, fastening the straps under her arms for her. It was a kindly thought, for the girl had not been able to afford a winter coat, and the serge she was wearing was not warm enough for the journey. Michael advised her to take off the toque he secretly loathed, and draw the quaint hood of the cloak over her bright, tumbled head in its place.

"Now you'll be able to lean your head against the back of the carriage and go to sleep, as you used to do in the tram-cars," he said. "Good-bye, childie. Don't forget—"

He paused, looking a little oddly at the flushed face, framed in the hood, that was raised to his.

What economies the purchase of that cloak had caused Michael Phayre it would be useless to ask, but the pinch of poverty was not harder to bear than the momentary temptation that he knew was only born of the loneliness of life and the weariness of an honest struggle to do the best that was in him, and starve the self-indulgence that lives in all men. Beauty was almost speechless with pleasure in her cloak and the natural kindness of the moment of parting. She looked quite a little girl, too, with her bright hair about her rosy face and her blue eyes simply full of affection. Michael had never given her anything so nice before; none of the men she knew had, in fact. Beauty loved presents, and particularly anything to wear. She lifted her warm lips to Phayre's with a sudden impulse.

"Good-bye!" she said breathlessly. "You *are* a good boy to me! I just love the cloak, and — and — you!"

The next minute some one — the guard possibly — had bundled her into the carriage, and she was wedged in between Our Fannie and Our Kittie, feeling rather elated, and glad that she had made the advance. But she wondered, even then, why he had taken off his hat and stood with bared head while he had kissed her. . . .

CHAPTER VI

DUBLIN did not approve itself to Beauty in the first weeks she spent there. It was very cold weather, to begin with, and the whole Company was hard worked to be ready to open by Boxing Night. Then there was the anxiety of wondering how the money would last, even though the landlady of the theatrical lodgings she shared with some of the Lilliput Troupe was obliging enough to allow her to run into debt, which it seemed to Beauty that she never really caught up with again till half-way through the run of the Pantomime. She dared not, anyhow, indulge herself with amusements or see much of the city. The trams ran her into a good deal of money, and by Christmas Day Kittie Smart and Beauty Darling were pretty well "stony," to use their own expression. Yet it would be against all theatrical traditions not to give gifts at festivals, though it were only a pennyworth of sweets, and so Beauty and her friends presented each other with penny toys bought from street vendors, or some other useless ware hardly more valuable, and knew that they must suffer in consequence at the first longed-for treasury.

The Pantomime was certainly hard work — harder work than Beauty had had at Allonby's. She changed her dress six times a night, for the Management had taken advantage of a clause in her contract to put her on in two extra scenes, and even

into the Harlequinade, which kept her up later than need have been. She could not complain, for she was anxious not to lose her place until she had at least paid off her debts, but she slept at nights more like the proverbial dog than even a tired child, and far into the next day, when she had to go again to the theatre for rehearsals as like as not. Then she caught a bad cold going to and from the theatre through the icy streets, and had to drag her tired, feverish little body through two performances in the very airy garments designed for Cupid, as well as the dresses of a nymph and the feathers of a human bird of paradise. It was fortunate for her that she had not been taken on to sing in the choruses, for her voice had been overstrained, and had she had to sing when really hoarse it might have injured it permanently. As it was, she danced indifferently in some of the more crowded scenes, marched in endless processions when pretty girls were in request, and spoke a few lines in the Pageant of Love, with less demand upon her mental capacities than had been the case even at Allonby's. The part of Dandini the page, which she was understudying, was of the calibre of most books of a Pantomime, and may be easily sampled.

> "In truth, my Prince, the girl on whom you doat
> Is not so dusty — offer her a vote!"

(Howls from the gallery. The Suffragettes had been busy of late.) There was more of the same sort, easily committed to memory and rapped out with a wink or a kick to emphasize the frequent double allusions. The girl who was cast for Dandini was laid

up for a week early in the run, and Beauty played the part; but it was not a great effort for an intellect which had really been well grounded and trained two or three years since. All the strain came on the girl's physique, somewhat weakened by an irregular life and careless habits, and she showed it in the sharpened outlines of her face and the dullness of her eyes.

For the first three weeks it must be owned that Beauty did not enjoy herself at all, and wished herself back in London. Then came the horrors of the dress rehearsal, when the Company were at work for twelve solid hours, and the stage hands enriched the language with new expletives, and the girls fell half asleep in the dressing-rooms from sheer fatigue, or kept themselves awake with brandy. The opening night was hardly better, save that every one was thankful when it was over; but after that things gradually improved a little. Beauty's youth stood her in good stead, and after all a change is a change, even when it is only from one city to another. She began to recover both her health and spirits with the receiving of her salary, and was soon looking better than she had done for a long time, almost since the first violent change from her old life at Wandlebridge to her new life of late hours, uncertain meals, and unhealthy atmospheres. To be sure, the late hours and the reek of the theatre continued, but the air even of Dublin seemed to agree with Beauty better than Peckham and Maida Vale. She was now just seventeen, and since she was safe from likely interference she told the truth about her age, though had she kept to her first assertion to Edgar Allonby she would have been nineteen. Girls of seventeen are sometimes called

"kids" on the Stage in a kind of indulgent admiration, but they are considered as grown-up, and certainly ripe for mischief.

The mischief was not far to seek at the Pantomime that year. Every girl in the Company had her "boys," either inside or outside the theatre, and sometimes both. The Lilliput Troupe had made the acquaintance of a wild group of medical students who took them out *en masse* and invaded their lodgings so that it was difficult to tell whose special property they were considered, and if Our Fannie were sitting on Mickey Burke's knee at teatime one day it was ten to one she would be sharing the arm-chair with Teddy Ryan to-morrow, while Our Nellie would take her place with Mickey. Beyond some horse-play and a little licence there was very little harm done, for Kittie had sharp eyes and at the least signs of hysteria she spoke her mind and called her friends to order.

"Fannie was going to make a fool of herself over Teddy, so I tipped him the wink to turn over to Our Dollie," she told Beauty Darling coolly. "He's a good little chap — he'll play the game. Fannie's always the worst to manage, and the fellows run after her because of the dimple on her nose!"

It was true that Our Fannie had this distinguishing feature, and that she proved seductive to anything under thirty; but there were probably psychological reasons that Kittie did not stop to fathom. Beauty shrugged her shoulders. "If I were Fannie I'd smack you for that!" she said lazily.

"She doesn't know — she thinks it's Dollie. But Mickey Burke has taken her on, so it doesn't matter," said Kittie easily. Truly the loves of the early 'teens

are reversible! "Are you coming in to tea to-day, Beauty?" she went on. "Do! Teddy's bringing a new boy."

"I'm afraid I'm on with the understudies," said Beauty regretfully. "There's a rehearsal at two; but I'll see."

She did, however, manage to get back at half-past four, to find tea in full swing, and the room smelling of buns and smoke, for it was packed with girls munching and young men with cigarettes. Not being one of the Troupe, Beauty was somewhat of an outsider and owned no particular "boy," but she was fairly familiar with the students and was greeted cordially. She sat down near Kittie, who was in charge of the tea-tray, and fell upon the remains of the feast, for she was really tired and hungry, nor did she notice who was supplying her with food until Teddy Ryan said, "May I introduce my friend Mr. Mannering, Miss Darling?" and she remembered that there was to be a "new boy" to add to the festivity.

Mannering merited the term less than the other youths, for he was seven-and-twenty — ten good years older than Beauty if one counts by actual time, but not much ahead of her in other essentials save the logic of an active brain. Beauty never troubled to think. George Mannering thought a good deal, and though it did not make him wiser it gave him a spurious knowledge. In appearance he was tall and well set-up, though slight, with reddish hair, a fair skin, and grey eyes — rather a personable young man to Beauty's mind as she thanked him for the cake which he handed to her. Beauty seldom smiled as the other girls at the Satyr or Allonby's, to show her teeth,

though they were small and white. Her lips pouted more naturally than parted, and her eyes were most beautiful when wide open and not narrowed by laughter. Young Mannering promptly began to talk to her, and his steady gaze upon her face told Beauty that he was quite ready to be an admirer.

"I'm clinical assistant to out-patients at the hospital," he explained, and she opened her eyes a little wider, for the other youths were merely students. "I'm sufficiently qualified to prescribe for you if you like to fall down and break your leg!"

"Thank you for nothing!" Beauty retorted. "You can keep your doctoring for the hospital."

"You might give me a little practice."

She laughed, stretching out her hand to show him an ugly cut on her wrist gained that afternoon by tripping over some scenery that was piled up in the dusk where it certainly should not have been. He uttered an exclamation and proceeded to bathe the wound with his handkerchief and some cold water, afterwards binding it up scientifically, while the other students offered him jeering advice and ludicrous comments.

"Make it figure-of-eight bandaging, George!"

"Stitch it up, old man!"

"Galvanic cautery —"

"Play fair, Georgie! Students admitted for training while the great man operates!"

But Mannering took very little notice. "Come and sit by the window and let me tie it up," he said quietly. "You'll have a scar if you aren't careful. Get out, you young devils!" He swung his arm and knocked a couple of the boys backwards into easy-chairs, where they toppled on to the girls and set up a fresh uproar.

Under cover of the noise Mannering bent down and looked into Beauty's face.

"I ought to kiss the place and make it well!" he said.

"Thanks — the remedy's worse than the disease!" she retorted smartly.

"Never mind — you will let me some day?" he said with a slight pressure on the hand he still held. "What a pretty name you have! I couldn't have chosen better for you myself — Beauty *Darling!*"

She laughed and tossed back her curls, but her heart beat pleasantly, and when he told her later that he should come round to-morrow to see how her hand was, and she was not to attempt to dress it without him, she did not say him nay, though she knew she must take off the extemporary bandage for the night's performance. On the whole Beauty was inclined to like young Mannering and to encourage him. He was the first young man who had paid her deliberate attention, and in the weeks which followed she accepted his presents and companionship, until the intimacy was such an established thing that even the Troupe ceased joking her about "Georgie Porgie." Hitherto Beauty's experiences had been limited to one actual assault by an elderly man, a little chaff and advances from shopboys and youths of their class, and some unwelcome attentions from the opposite sex in and about the theatre. She had never had a proper "affair" of her own, and she was a little inclined to lose her head at the outset.

No one who has not lived amongst theatrical people in theatrical lodgings can realize the violent intimacies that spring up in the course of a few days. At the

end of a week Beauty knew all of George's family history that there was to know, and had told him her version of her foster-mother's turning her out of the house and its cause.—" There was a gentleman lodging with us in our cottage, and I was a silly kid and he kissed me, and mother found out. My! there was a holy row! She said I'd done all sorts of dirty things that of course I hadn't, and she threatened to beat me. The man had gone — I've never set eyes on him since and hope I never shall — and I simply ran out of the house crying, and went straight to Allonby's and they took me on."

In outline the tale was true, and George was not particularly interested in cross-examining her for details. Of course he kissed her, and said it was a shame and she was a plucky little girl, and Beauty put her head down on his shoulder and found it very nice to be petted. There was no talk of any engagement between them, still less of marriage, but it was a comfortable understanding that while the Pantomime ran George belonged to Beauty and Beauty to George, and their love-making was no more harmful than that of the Lilliput Troupe.

But there came a night when George's jealousy was aroused, and he became the male animal fighting for his rights over the female. He was accustomed to wait for Beauty at the stage-door two or three evenings during the week at least — his work sometimes prevented his doing so every night — however late the hour. One night she was very much behind her usual time, and when she appeared she was upset and tearful, the hands that clung to his arm were trembling, and she could hardly speak.

"Beauty!" he exclaimed, drawing her out of the glare of the lamp into the dark of the side-street. "What's the matter? Who has upset you?"

"Oh, it's nothing — a beast of a man frightened me!" she said with a little sob.

She felt the muscles of the arm she held tighten, and his voice sounded odd as he spoke to her: "Tell me who it was. I must know —"

"Oh, it doesn't matter — it's all over — I gave him as good as he did me!"

"Tell me who it was," Mannering repeated quietly, and his voice was not to be denied.

"Charlesworth — the 'trick motorist,'" Beauty acknowledged, mentioning one of the Special Turns who had been engaged from the Halls as an attraction that had nothing to do with the Pantomime itself. The man in question was of the lowest type amongst the huge cast, a brutal, common-spoken man, whose iron nerves made him a most marvellous and skilful artist in working his little "trick" motor about the stage. Most of the girls avoided Charlesworth, for he was one too many for them, hardened as they were. Beauty had never complained of him before to-night.

"Tell me what he did!" said Mannering, with his teeth set.

"Oh, there was a mistake, and some of his props were left about in our scene and he was mad. He swore at everybody, and I said to Belle Farmer that he'd better go amongst people who understood his language, and then he turned on me —"

"Go on!"

"*George!* Don't look so angry! You frighten me more than he did —"

"It's all right, sweetheart — I'm not angry with you. Tell me what he did."

"He said he'd kiss me for that, and I said he daren't, and he got hold of me and pushed me down on a heap of curtains they'd thrown back on the O. P. side after the court scene. I just yelled, and Kittie and some of the others came and pulled him off."—

"I should like to go back into the theatre and have it out with him now, if you'll just wait for me, Beauty," said Mannering with ominous quiet, but Beauty clung to him and implored him not to. She was really upset and unfit to go home alone, and with great reluctance he gave in to her and took her under his escort, going into her lodgings with her to see that she was quite all right, and then upsetting her again by the sudden violence with which he took her in his arms.

"Beauty! Promise me you'll never let another man really come near you!" he said in a choked voice. "I can't bear it — it's driving me wild." He lifted her easily in his arms and carried her over to the arm-chair, where he sat down with her on his knee. She was still small and slight enough to be treated like a child, but there was something that frightened her a little in his manner.

"Of course I won't — silly boy!" she said uneasily. "I hated it! — Don't squeeze me so, George! I'm so tired to-night —"

"Poor little girl!" he said, but his clasp tightened rather than loosened, and he kissed her almost roughly when she finally persuaded him to go away. He would have lingered till long after midnight if she

would have let him but she saw him go with positive relief.

He came to take her for a bicycle ride the next day. Beauty had learned sufficiently to get her balance on another girl's bicycle in her schooldays, and since she had known George Mannering he had taken her out cycling whenever weather permitted and he could get an afternoon off. It suited Beauty, and she rode well and untiringly. They went out toward Mullingar, and were clear of the city itself in a quarter of an hour. The afternoon was cloudy but not very cold, and the country had that intensely quiescent appearance that it gains in the early days of February. It was so toned in sad shades of brown and grey that it seemed impossible it could ever revive to more vivid colours. Far from suggesting spring, the very ploughshares slowly turning the sod seemed to be softly preparing the earth for a grave. Everything was very dead, and the low skies were full of tears to weep for pity.

The sombre landscape seemed to affect George Mannering, for he hardly spoke as they ran smoothly side by side through wet lanes and muddy roads; but he looked round at his companion constantly and as if he could not look long enough or satiate himself, with a kind of stealthy hunger. Beauty was worth looking at; the dull afternoon did not affect her because, as Michael Phayre had said in despair, she had never learned to see with her wonderful eyes. She was hoping that it would not rain, because it was so beastly riding in wet clothes, and she was a little afraid that her bicycle might skid on the slippery roads — it was a free-wheel and a good machine that George

had hired for her. She liked riding it; the easy motion suited her young body without tiring her, and sent the blood flying through her veins. How pretty she was! How pretty! The wind of their going had brought the colour to her cheeks like the warm side of a peach, her eyes were full of light, and her loose, curly hair was blown back round her cap like an aureole. That vivid, breathing loveliness of life and colour had fired the blood of men long past their prime — it went to George Mannering's head like new wine. The natural physical jealousy of the night before had roused the latent Man in him to demand proprietary rights in the Woman, which so far had merely been the passive agent in a boy and girl love-affair.

Suddenly it began to rain, a gust of wind bringing up a wintry squall and threatening the cyclists with a downpour. The wind drove the rain slanting at their unprotected bodies, and threatened to drench them before they could find shelter. It was so fierce and so unexpected that they had no time to consider whether they could reach the next village, or whether a group of leafless trees would afford them protection, and it caught them between the barren stone walls guarding the dim brown fields.

"Ride as hard as you can, Beauty!" George called across the storm. "There's a barn in the next field — we'll try to get in there."

The girl was on the weather side, so that the wall afforded her some slight protection, but the young man caught the whole brunt of it, and by the time he had succeeded in unlatching the gate of the field and had hurried the girl through, his jacket was streaked with the rain. Neither of them had brought

mackintoshes, but Beauty, sheltered under the walls, had fared much less the worse. The heavy barn door yielded to Mannering's attack upon it and slowly opened to admit them to a large storage place, only encumbered with some farm implements and a wagon or so. It was at least dry, and Mannering pushed the door close to keep out the rain, and leaned the two bicycles against the wall. Then he turned to the girl, and seizing her almost roughly, kissed her hair and lips and eyes, whose beauty still stung his memory though he could hardly see her in the dim light.

"I've wanted to do that for the last half-hour!" he said in a queer, choked voice. "My God, child! but you are lovely!"

Beauty was startled. She liked the compliment, and was flattered by the very real feeling of the man's tones; but even the shadow of passion made her catch her breath with a little fear, and she was always half afraid of being alone with a lover when he first became in earnest. She pushed George away from her with a little practical exclamation:

"I say, you *are* wet! I hope you won't get a chill. What shall we do? Your coat is soaking!"

"Never mind!" he said impatiently. "I'll take my coat off — we can't ride on or back till the rain is over. It will have time to dry. Don't be so cold, Beauty!"

"I'm not cold," said the girl resentfully. "But I don't want you to be ill — I know I shouldn't see you for weeks if you were! Your own people would come and take possession of you as you told me they always do, and they'd nurse you, and I shouldn't be allowed to come anywhere near." She cuddled her

soft cheek against his wet shoulder, and looked up with deep laughing eyes. "George, *do* take off that wet coat!"

"In a minute," he said hurriedly. His eyes, more used to the light now, had seen a ladder leading up to a loft, and he climbed up to investigate, finding — as he had hoped — that it was stored with trusses of hay. He called down to Beauty to follow him, and when she did so he heaped some of the sweet dried grasses into a great nest, and divesting himself of his wet coat, threw himself down on the soft resting-place.

"Now," he said, "we shall neither of us catch cold, and we can bury ourselves in hay if we like until it has cleared up and we are dry again. Come and play at hay-making!"

Beauty gave an exclamation of delight, and plumped down beside him. She seized handfuls of the loose hay and began to bury him, laughing like a child, and he lay still until nearly covered, and then sprang up as from an ambush and caught her in his arms. She shrieked in her excitement, and he hushed her quickly.

"Sh-sh-sh! Some one might hear. People don't leave barns with haylofts unlocked unless they are constantly coming and going themselves."

"Well, it doesn't matter if they do come! We are only sheltering from the rain."

"It's trespassing all the same," he said rather confusedly. "And if it were a passer-by who heard you they might slip in and steal the bicycles."

Beauty hushed her mirth without much heed to the illogical argument, and because he obviously wished

it. It was warm and dusky and sweet in the hayloft, and they lay down like two children and nestled into its rustling masses. It seemed so natural to turn to each other and kiss daintily, without more words, lying so close together; and then for the girl's soft head to be pillowed on the man's shoulder while he drew her closer — his plea mere broken whispers, the warmth of his caresses rousing in her at last some answering flame so that her lips clung to his breathlessly, and her whole young body leapt and burned, while the world reeled past in uncounted minutes or hours.—

What followed seemed quite natural also. . . .

CHAPTER VII

"OH, I'm getting fed up with this old show! I wish the whole bally thing would go to pot!" Our Fannie tossed the end of a stump of No. 1 grease-paint to Our Dollie, and proceeded to brush her neck and arms with a horrible concoction of whitening that peeled off in flakes and left its mark on dark coats — as Teddy Ryan had discovered. The breach between Our Fannie and Our Dollie had been healed by the discovery of mutual faithlessness on the part of Mickey Burke, and they obliged each other with the tools of their profession as usual. Mickey, indeed, had been cast out of the whole Troupe as a traitor, and had betaken himself to a little girl in the acrobatic trio, which was regarded as such a "come-down" for him that all the girls were full of the satisfaction that sees vice punished. Yet to-night Our Fannie did not look pleased.

"What's up?" said Our Kitty sharply.

"Oh, Panto's a rotten job — it goes on too long and yet not long enough! You don't get a decent run as you do in Musical Comedy, and yet it's not like special weeks. Two months — or ten weeks — what's that? Long enough to get stale, and not long enough to introduce new life into it. I hate every one about the eighth week!"

"The Crowd is too mixed!" said Our Kittie crit-

ically. "I grant you that. What are all those Knockabouts doing cottoning on to Us? I'm surprised that the Managers don't let them know their place!"

"Same here!" agreed Our Poppie from the table on which she was swinging her legs, for she was always the quickest at making-up and ready first.

"Well, the Knockabouts are cheery at any rate!" grumbled Our Fannie, slipping the towel from her shoulders and taking her dancing-dress from the Dresser. "Every one else seems to have got the pip! There's Beauty Darling hasn't spoken a word for days, and Our Nellie's moping in concert."

"Georgie-Porgie's ill!" said Our Poppie significantly. "He hasn't been round for the last week."

"Why?"—Kittie's voice was sharper still. She was not in the same rooms as Our Poppie and Our Nellie, who shared with Beauty Darling, and had taken it for granted that young Mannering was going and coming as usual.

"Georgie caught a chill, cycling in the rain with Beauty last Friday," said Our Poppie from the table. "He's had to go to bed-O, and take a nasty draught-O, and he can't have his Beauty to nurse him —"

"Oh, dry up!" said Kittie impatiently, but her delicate dark brows drew into a worried knit, and she began to think and to draw conclusions that were disturbing. The outcome of her cogitations was an apparently careless remark to Beauty Darling as they were changing into mufti that night in the dressing-room. Beauty had not, of course, been present when she was herself under discussion, her appearances on the stage being at different times to the Lilliput

Troupe's, but in the wild scramble to get rid of the paint and the Pantomime dresses she generally shared.

"Shall we walk home together?" Kittie said as she pinned her hat on. "George isn't coming for you, is he?"

"No," said Beauty, with a pouting underlip. "He's laid up; it's a bad attack of rheumatism, and he thinks he'd better stay in bed."

"Oh!" said Kittie, and forbore further comment. When they were walking home, however, having refused further escort, she asked how long George had been ill.

"Since Saturday," said Beauty, with a promptness that betrayed how much it was in her thoughts. "He came to the stage-door Saturday night, but he was shivering with a kind of chill then, and I begged him to go home."

"He hasn't been to see you since?"

"No; he went to bed on Sunday, and his people came down to nurse him."

Kittie whistled softly. "No chance for you to go round to see him, then," she said.

"I would have done, for half a damn —"

"Perhaps it's just as well you can't," Kittie cut in. "George has been fooling round a lot, hasn't he? You don't want to pull a long face like Our Fannie over Burke, when he doesn't come again —"

"He will come again — when he's all right —"

There was a pause. Then Our Kittie took her courage in her two hands and spoke out, as her progenitors had done in the slums of Drury Lane for several generations. It came naturally to Kittie to speak and spare not, and she did not hesitate for the

scene she half expected, not recognizing that Beauty Darling was as incapable of paying her back in her own coin as of standing up to a fishwife in Billingsgate. Kittie would have faced the latter, unconsciously as to the manner born.

"Look here, Beauty," she said. "You're going about like a silly fool over George Mannering, and you'd better give it up before anything worse happens. He comes of people who wouldn't welcome a girl who had been in the Panto, and ten to one he won't come back when he gets all right again. You'd better let him go and not behave as if he *ought* to come, or there'll be too much talk. I'd soon have it out of Our Fannie if she went on like you for any man; I never let them get mad on any feller!"

"I'll thank you to mind your own business," said Beauty sulkily. "I don't want anyone interfering with George or me." But she did not fly into the passion that Kittie expected, and there was a suspicion of tears in her voice.

"Well, I've warned you!" said Kittie in the virtuous voice that people always assume when they know that the warning has been unwelcome. "If you don't chuck the whole business, you'll be sorry. Give Georgie the go-by while you can — or leave him alone when he gets up again. I don't believe his people will *let* him come back!"

Beauty did not answer. Into her big blue eyes had come a look of fear — such fear as only ignorant feminine nature endures under certain conditions. The night was chilly, and she shivered a little even in Michael Phayre's golf cloak. The two girls parted at Beauty's door, and with a curt "Good night"

Beauty went in, leaving Our Kittie to go on to her own lodgings.

Our Poppie was out to supper that night with two more of the Troupe and a kindly middle-aged couple (friends of Teddy Ryan's) who saw no harm in the little dancers and wished to give them "a good time." Kittie had not been invited, and Beauty did not know them. The lodgings were quite deserted and felt dark and cheerless as she went in, shivering again, for the fire was out. Beauty struck a match and lit the gas, but the room was so cold and depressing that she wished that she had remained in the dark or gone straight to bed. Yet being there she seemed to lack the initiative to make a move, and sat down forlornly in the arm-chair that had held so many couples, thinking. . . .

The terror came back to her eyes tenfold, and she sprang up suddenly and turned out the gas, creeping to her bed in the room beyond, where she threw herself down, crying. Had there been anyone in the lodgings save her landlady she might have made a clean breast of her fears, and soothed herself with the actual statement. It was the indefinite terror of what might happen to her that was reducing her to an hysterical outburst; but there was no one to speak to, and by and by she threw off her clothes and sobbed herself to sleep.

Beauty was pitifully ignorant, in spite of the things she saw and heard round her day by day. Immorality to her meant nothing but the fear of discovery — the necessity to keep the accomplished fact unacknowledged. But sometimes girls "get caught," and that was a disaster that must be spoken of in lowered

voices. The dread of child birth was threefold — first the open shame and fear of unknown pangs; then the loss of work when a girl began to lose her figure, and the permanent loss of it if she did not regain her shape properly; finally the burden of the child's maintenance. The man in these cases was a negligible quantity; he was not likely to be of much use. No thought of appealing to George crossed her mind at the moment when fear dawned upon her, and later on it only came as a last resource. She cowered at the dread of the possible disaster before her, and began to firmly believe in it at the end of a week, without the slightest foundation for such a belief.

If she could have seen George Mannering and confided her fears to him, Beauty would soon have been comforted. For one thing George was chivalrous enough to have promised to marry her despite all disadvantages of opposition from his family, did it really prove that she was going to have a child. But George had succumbed to the results of being wet through when they cycled together. He had forgotten all about time in the delirium of passion, and had lingered on in the hayloft with Beauty until he very nearly made her late for the theatre. He himself had gone home, but had turned up at the stage-door that night, as she had told Kittie, shivering with the first chill that foreboded fever; and though he had laughed at her fears, and had promised to take quinine and whisky as a preventive, he had been obliged to send her a pencilled note next day to say he was in bed and obliged to lie still owing to the pain in his limbs. The note had been almost as feverish as his pulse — an unbalanced mixture of devotion and despair that had

at least flattered Beauty by its desire to get to her again. But George's temperature went higher yet, and the doctors began to look grave. Instead of his coming to see her, she heard indirectly — through Teddy Ryan — that his mother and sister had come posthaste to Dublin to nurse him, and that he was down with rheumatic fever. Between her real feeling for George — and it was the first time that Beauty had experienced anything that could be dignified as love for any man — and her fear for him; her ignorant dismay at what she had done and her fear for herself; above all the necessity not to admit her trouble — Beauty Darling was nearly at the end of her tether. It was aggravated by the resentment of Nature at having passions aroused that were no longer satisfied, and the instinct to repeat a series of emotions that ended in a new pleasure. If George had been able to continue their intimacy, it is certain that the relations between them would have continued for a time at least, and that Beauty's mind would not have worked upon her body to their mutual disaster. As it was she became neurotic and morbid to the verge of hysteria, and to add to her trouble she had to face it alone. There was no one to whom she could appeal, the only letter she wrote being strangely enough to Michael Phayre. They had had an intermittent correspondence ever since Beauty went on tour, but she was never in haste either to receive or answer his letters, for it was a mental effort that she shirked. Half the time she would skip a sentence if there were no matter-of-fact detail upon which she could seize, and what she did read she rarely tried to understand. Her own letter, written in her dark days, was so much

made up of ambiguity and contradictions when she thought she admitted too much, that Phayre did not take it very seriously. "I have been a little fool — but not like other girls — I don't mean that. I have grown too fond of somebody — but it doesn't matter because circumstances have parted us. . . . I wonder what you would say to me if I could have a good talk with you? I dare say you would laugh at me after all."— Phayre thought that Beauty was beginning a sentimental phase in her adolescence that might not hurt her, and was rather glad that she should learn to feel, however elementary the education. He took his time to write back, waiting until he could feel in sympathy with her — and in the meantime Beauty faced despair.

It was one Sunday night that she reached her climax. Sunday was always a day of slackened will-power and indulgence to those employed at the theatre, and the lack of discipline and work did not always mean an alternative of rest. The Lilliput Troupe had slept almost into the forenoon, and would only rise for the tea-party arranged for the afternoon on the lines of all their other tea-parties — Mickey Burke, Teddy Ryan, etc., and much stale tobacco and unwholesome confectionery before the afternoon was over. But Beauty had risen earlier and had some breakfast and lunch together, spurred by the intolerable restlessness that had overtaken her of late. She felt she could not face the chaff and laughter, or take her part in the usual repartee —"You're another!" being its sprightly text. It was a dull day towards the end of February, but not very cold. George had been ill some weeks, and the strain of her trouble was

telling on Beauty. Furthermore, the work at the theatre had been heavy, for the Pantomime was drawing to a close and its final weeks were to be a burst of splendour, new effects and pageants being introduced even at this late hour. Beauty's face was almost as white as it had been in London, and sharpened with fretting. She had begun to think that such signs were the obvious ones of her coming maternity, and browsed upon all sorts of unclean fiction that she could obtain, describing the feelings of girls who had "got caught" and were several months gone in childbirth, without seeing the absurdity of the comparison. Certainly she knew that she had not lost her figure, but she was slight and small and childish. Some women did not show it very much, perhaps. Anyhow, that would come later.

On this February Sunday she decided to go for a walk by herself, driven by her own thoughts and the growing terror of her supposed condition. Her hands clasped and unclasped nervously as she made her way east of Sackville Street, and down towards the docks, and she was rapidly losing her self-control and reasoning power together.

The short day was rapidly growing dusk, and two sullen lines of red in the west represented sunset, like raw wounds in the sullen grey sky. She wandered aimlessly, now east, now west, but the river drew her like an uncanny spell, and the nearer she could get to it the more she stopped to look down into its cold, steady flow. For the first time the face of Nature meant something to Beauty Darling, and her eyes could see in her extremity. She thought that it was because it might be the last sight she would have of

earth, and it seemed to her that suddenly the world stood out in broad drawing and colouring, like a landscape accentuated by fever. Indeed her brain was working at fever-heat, and her body seemed moving without her will through a delirium. One thing after another flashed into her mind — little scraps of conversation between herself and other girls, bars of music in choruses she had almost forgotten. She remembered an afternoon in Hyde Park with intense vividness, when Michael Phayre had tried to make her look at things with seeing eyes, and she had only been intent on other couples passing them — "Do look at those small downy clouds, Beauty! A whole flock of them! Some cherub has certainly lost his wings."— "Oh, how you do go on, Mr. Phayre!"— Yet at the present instant she could see the two raw wounds in the sky, the menacing dark houses piled against it, the steady inward flow of the river that ran past the bridges, dragging her with it. . . .

The end came very suddenly, and was an impulse like a flash of pain. She had hardly time to be surprised at herself, or frightened. She only knew that she must jump. . . . George was somewhere hidden in those cruel houses, and would not help her — and there was something even now forming in her, a new horrible birth that was Terror incarnate. Beauty did not know if she stifled the shriek that rose in her throat; she only knew that she made a leap and sprang. . . .

. . . . . .

When she looked up it was morning, or else so full of light that night seemed to have rolled into Eternity. There were faces round her, stern and anxious, and

her body tingled with returning life. She did not remember what had happened, and when it was later on recalled to her memory that she had tried to commit suicide by jumping into the river, she stared with horrified eyes, and then burst into tears like a frightened child. One thing the plunge into cold water had done for her — it had cured her of the hysterical phase and left her with a firmer grip on life.

Fortunately for her she was too ill to return to the theatre immediately. The long ward of the hospital, where she had been hastily taken to attempt resuscitation of life, became the next scene that appeared on her tired brain, and she grew used to the flitting to and fro of uniformed nurses and hurried doctors, and to the beds stretching away from her filled with patient suffering. The nurses were brisk and cheerful; they treated her like a naughty child who must be kept aware of its fault, even while they looked after her bodily comfort. Beauty was subdued and depressed. She was really suffering from shock, and for a few days it did not matter to her that she was losing her place at the theatre and her means of livelihood. The Management had of course been informed, and the papers had had headlines —"Attempted suicide of a chorus girl! Miss Beauty Darling, well known in the Pantomime here!" It would reach London in time; how the world would talk! It did not matter, so long as they would let her lie still in the long light ward, where the cold winter air blew so unceasingly night and day. As soon as she could answer questions she was, of course, put through a racking cross-examination as to the reason of her attempt on her life; but Beauty's dazed blue eyes held little or no intelligence

for their questions. She had been unhappy and she thought she must have been ill. She remembered walking in the streets for a long time, and then came the impulse to jump into the river. She could say nothing more. When they told her in solemn tones how wicked she had been to try to end her life, she simply cried. The impulse had passed, and left her very thankful that she was still alive.

It was no use to try to find her friends, or to return her to a mother who would protest "that she could not keep her daughter in order!"— the usual theatrical excuse. Beauty had neither friends nor relations except those amongst the Pantomime people, and Kittie bore her out as to all the facts of the case when called upon to witness. She thought Beauty Darling had been unwell; the work had been very hard, and she had been singularly unlike herself. But, of course, Kittie had had no idea that she was hardly responsible for her own actions, or she would never have let her go out alone. Questioned as to any cause for Beauty's mental state, Kitty did not know — she did not pry into other girls' affairs! Yes, there might be a man in the case. There had been a good many intimacies. Cross-examined, Kitty admitted that Beauty Darling had had a friend who was lying at death's door with rheumatic fever, and might have worried over him — but the shrewdest of interrogators may well be at a loss dealing with a girl of Kittie's calibre who will not go back on a pal. There seemed nothing to do but dismiss Beauty Darling from the hospital with a severe caution, when she was well enough, and leave her to face her world again as best she might, as is the way with such flotsam. For-

tunately, the case had not got into the hands of the police, or she must have faced the police-courts.

She could not go back to the theatre, for the Management would not have her, though they put it upon the ground that they had engaged some one else to take her place, and that it was hardly necessary for Miss Darling to return for the short time the Pantomime was then running. Beauty's attempt to drown herself had not been at all a bad advertisement, but the Stage-Manager was a little afraid of the temper of the public if she were recognized. They might hiss her, or "give her the bird," as the saying is, which means a system of guying some particular artist from the cheaper portions of the house, and that not only entailed that Beauty's appearances would raise a storm of ironical applause and mockery, but that all the scenes with which she was associated would be upset. It was too much of a risk, and Miss Darling received her salary for the two performances she had been in since last treasury, and also her notice.

The most serious loss to her was the fare which she would have had to England by returning with the Company. She had saved a few pounds during the weeks of the run, though by no means the amount she had intended. Somehow living had not been so inexpensive, even sharing with her friends, and perhaps the natural childish instinct to spend, though only a few pence on sweets, had run away with the money. After all, Beauty was only seventeen, though she had learned in the hard school of necessity. Anyhow, the money so saved would only pay for a week or so's living while she got over her convalescence, or for the fare she had forfeited, if she

returned to London at once. London was the inevitable goal at which she aimed as instinctively as a homing pigeon. She knew hardly any other place, and it was the most likely centre in which she would find work. But her body was still weak from the chill and fever following on her immersion, and her mind was still weak from the worry and misery preceding it. She dully resented it even when obliged to get up and help to wait on the other patients, more helpless than herself, while the idea of being dismissed from the hospital struck her with blank dismay. She had nowhere to go. Kittie and the rest of the Lilliput Troupe looked upon her a little askance, as she had felt when they came to see her in the ward. To Kittie's shrewd, practical mind, Beauty had made a hopeless fool of herself all round, and was under the stigma of social disgrace whether she actually deserved it or not. They were all too good-natured to desert her in her extreme need, but there was no suggestion that she should come back to her old quarters with them, and she heard, casually, that Our Dollie had been glad to take her room as being nearer the theatre than where she was. The stage is startlingly respectable at times, when it comes to actualities, however lightly it may regard unproven facts.

There was one visitor who appeared amongst the procession at Beauty's bedside who did not belong to the Profession or to the hospital. At first he was a misty impression of a middle-aged man with grey hair and beard and a cheerful, rather humorous manner; but as her mind began to collect itself she heard and recognized that he was a doctor who had been the first man to render prompt assistance when she was

picked up out of the river. It was he who had brought her to the hospital, though he was not connected with it, having a widespread poor practice of his own, and he took enough interest in the case to come several times to see how Beauty was going on, and to talk to her. When he heard that she was considered fit to leave he asked her her plans.

"I don't know," said Beauty, almost sullenly. "I suppose I shall go back to London, if I've enough money for the fare. Could you tell me what it will be?"

"You are hardly fit for a long journey all by yourself, at once," he said quietly, but his kindly eyes dwelt a little sadly on the girl's small white face and drooping figure. Some of the brightness and curl seemed to have gone out of her hair, which was still allowed to fall over her shoulders schoolgirl fashion, and her blue eyes were so large and dark in contrast to her lack of colour that they looked tragic. She was still pretty, for the shape of her face and the small features defied criticism, and there is no getting over blue eyes and red lips and gold-brown hair, but her prettiness was a little pathetic.

"Can't you do something else for a living for a time, until you are fit to go back to the stage? It is such a hard life!" said the doctor gently.

Beauty shook her head. She knew of no market wherein she had wares to sell save the stage, or as an artist's model, and with a strange tenacity she would rather have risked starvation than posed again, even if she had known where to apply.

"Can you sew?" said the doctor suddenly.

"Yes," said Beauty, rather surprised. "Perhaps

I could get some embroidery to do?" she added, without enthusiasm, however. It was badly paid work, as she knew, and long dull hours of application. "I have often been told I work well enough for the shops."

"I don't want embroidery," said the doctor with his quizzical smile. "But I do want some sewing done. I live with my sister — we are both unmarried, elderly people, and her eyesight is failing her very much. She complains that the household linen needs much mending, and is getting into arrears. I will take you into my house as a little sewing-maid for a week or so if you like to come, until you are able to travel. Then you can save what money you have in hand, and you will not have to keep yourself while in my house. I shall only be able to pay you what I should a woman who does such work professionally, however. What do you think about it?"

Beauty twisted one of her soft loose curls round her finger in a way she did when perplexed, and looked at her Good Samaritan with her great tragic eyes. The hint of tragedy in her face, which lay chiefly in the formation of the brows and the unsmiling lips, was much accentuated since her illness. She did not like the idea at all — it sounded very derogatory from her standpoint, which was that she was a young lady with a "profession," and not by any means a working girl. The ludicrous vanity of this standard as applied to a certain type of chorus girl — slipshod in her speech, often careless to uncleanliness in her habits, foul in her mind, and loose in her morals — could only have been exemplified by an indignant shop-assistant or a decent young woman in domestic service.

But there are, of course, all classes in the ranks of the chorus as well as behind the counters of shops or in domestic service, and it was the habit of ranking herself with girls who were obviously of a much higher grade that caused Beauty Darling to think the position offered to her was a "come-down." Had she been a girl of a type that forces respect and admiration for those who work their way up from the lower ranks to an established position on the stage, she would not have hesitated. The honest chance to earn her bread and restore her shaken mind and body would have been recognized at once, and she would have seen it as a means to the end of getting back to her original work and improving her position — the real purpose that seizes every means whereby to rise. But poor Beauty, really only fitted for the post of sewing-maid for anything she had done so far, hesitated, with a pouting underlip, and at last accepted the offer made to her through sheer necessity.

"Then that's settled," said the doctor cheerfully, as he rose to go. "I shall tell the matron that you are coming to me — you leave on Tuesday, don't you? And I shall tell my sister that I have found her a little sewing-maid." (Beauty winced.) "My name is Dr. Hardinge, and I will leave you my address."

Beauty did not see him again until she presented herself at his house and asked for Miss Hardinge. She had come in a cab, because she had to bring her big theatre basket and smaller luggage, and was not even yet very fit to walk. The house was a quiet one, in an unfashionable neighbourhood, but though shabby it was all the same of a higher stamp than any in which Beauty had ever lived, for it was the home

of gentlepeople, and unlike either Mrs. Darling's cottage or the series of theatrical rooms in which she had passed her existence ever since she left Wandlebridge, not excepting the little flat at Maida Vale, where the breadcrumbs and dust so frequently gathered under the table and it was nobody's business to clean or keep order. The servant who admitted her left her standing in the hall while she went to tell her mistress, and Beauty felt the first sense of satisfaction that had come to her over her new engagement at the unknown atmosphere of home-life and cleanliness round her. It was a very busy household, and the hall was not even very tidy — there was none of that spick and span paint and new fittings that beset some houses in the middle class and to which some even of Beauty's school-fellows had been born. But it carried the personality of two cultured, wide-minded people — gentlefolk both of them, though their means were small.

Miss Hardinge came out of a room on the right a moment later, settling her glasses on her nose and peering at the new importation with near-sighted eyes. She was a spare elderly woman with a great likeness to her brother, and it must be owned that she regarded Beauty with some dismay, though her greeting was as civil as if to one of her own acquaintances.

"Oh, you are the young girl of whom Dr. Hardinge spoke to me?" she said, her eyes wandering from Beauty's fur cap, inevitably at the back of her head, to her unconfined hair and the soiled silk blouse, collarless and trimmed with much lace, which was visible under the historic golf-cape. "I understand that you are going to undertake the mending that has accumulated since my eyes were weak?"

"Yes," said Beauty lamely. Her assurance seemed to have been left behind at the theatre, and though she did not say "ma'am," she felt a dependent.

"You have been ill, I understand. You don't look very strong."

"I have been in the hospital," said Beauty with a moment's hesitation. She did not know how much Miss Hardinge might have heard about her, and a painful flush of red blood surged up over her face, making her look still more like a bashful child.

Miss Hardinge's expression softened, and for the first time a slight smile crossed her face. "There is a great deal of mending to do," she said dryly. "Do you think you can undertake it?"

"I will do my best!" said poor Beauty, feeling the humiliation of her position as keenly as physical pain.

"Well, you had better have some lunch now, and later on I will set you to work," said Miss Hardinge briskly. "Emma, Miss Darling will have her meals in my workroom, and then she will be able to keep all her things together."

The explanation was vague, but the fact was that the doctor and his sister had decided that it would be wiser to keep Beauty away from intimate association with the servants, who looked down on her already as much as she did on them. Master to their minds was a "crank," and this was one of his charities; but the servants loved the doctor, and so they made no trouble over Beauty's presence in the house, or even carrying her meals to the little workroom. They had gathered the threads of the story together, of course, and knew who she was, having read it in the newspapers; but they

only left her severely alone, and expressed unmitigated opinions of her in the kitchen.

Beauty herself was relieved to be so let alone, and accepted her meals apart as a recognition of her superiority to the servants — the real reason did not occur to her. It was a very subdued edition of Beauty Darling who sewed and mended Dr. Hardinge's household linen, and even her appearance was much toned down, not only because she had been ill, but because Miss Hardinge had quietly insisted on her wearing different clothes.

"I must ask you to wear a dark gown — either black or dark blue — while you are at work here," she said in a take-it-for-granted fashion that Beauty found it impossible to combat. "No doubt your blouses and skirts are very suited for stage life, but I think you will see that they are not appropriate in Dr. Hardinge's household. That silk is too thin for this cold weather too," she added, with a disapproving glance at the much-washed garment that had originally come to Beauty through the Guild and been embellished by her with cheap lace and a cut-down collar. "And as you still wear your hair down I should be obliged if you would tie it back!" she added dryly.—

"I really *couldn't* have her looking like a girl from a railway refreshment-room or a booth in a fair!" she said in a spasm of impatience to her brother. "I didn't like her leaving the house or being seen to enter it when I sent her on errands."

But the doctor only laughed. "I expect she burst into angry tears, eh?" he said, with his eyes twinkling. "Be patient with her, Madge — she is still very run down and suffering from arrears of hard work and

bad food, and she has been taught to think that vulgar exaggeration makes her prettier."

"She didn't cry, as a matter of fact," Miss Hardinge admitted. "She took it very quietly — a little sullenly perhaps. I have bought her a ready-made black serge skirt, and cut out and fitted the bodice for her, and she has made it herself. She is a clever little puss with her needle! If only she would look after herself and dress neatly she would look like a lady, but she can't see that, of course!"

"I haven't caught sight of her for a day or two," said the doctor, laughing. "Is the change startling?"

"It's a great improvement anyhow, and I tell you what, Jim, it has made even the servants much more civil in their manner to her. You know how clever servants are in noticing these things. She has tied her hair back with a big bow (I wish it had been smaller, but one can't have everything). And she looks reasonably warm and almost refined in a decent frock that doesn't show half a yard of soiled neck and those awful beads!"

The doctor laughed outright and heartily. "Don't let your horror run away with you, Madge! She was a very clean child —"

"I can't help it. Those girls who will wear low gowns and short sleeves always look soiled in daylight, if they would only see it."

"She is a very pretty child in spite of everything — low necks and strings of beads and too much hair!"

"Yes, she is," Miss Hardinge agreed cordially. She was as kindly as her brother and as ready to praise generously where she found any cause. "But

I am afraid, poor child, it must be anything but a blessing to her. I suppose you never really discovered what was the cause of her throwing herself into the river?"

"The obvious solution would be to say there must be a young man who had treated her badly, but I really believe it was as much hysteria as anything. I never asked for her confidence."

"But the hysteria must have had a cause, and the young man may have come first," said Miss Hardinge, knitting her brows. "I think there is something on her mind still, but I have not attempted to question her."

"Do you?" said the doctor more gravely. "I thought it was merely due to the shock and her illness and the depression of finding that she was out of work — quite enough to sober any girl! But if there is more, as you say, I ought to find out. I think I will have a little talk to Miss Beauty Darling one of these days."

He did not often encounter his protégée, unless he met her in the hall going in or out on some errand for Miss Hardinge, who took care that she should have both air and exercise. The doctor and his sister might easily have been taken in by this girl they had allowed into their house without a character — with, if anything, a rather bad one; but they were generally justified in their judgment, and Miss Hardinge not only let the girl go out alone, but trusted her with money for small commissions. They took it for granted that Beauty Darling was honest, and she would have been ashamed to rob them, even though she might have been tempted to do so from her outlook on a

rather desperate future. Mrs. Darling's early training had made her honest, however, and she had always looked askance on the petty pilferings that sometimes came to light in the theatre. The doctor had only made one inquiry about her, and that had been to the Manager of the theatre where the Pantomime was running, but the answer had been quite satisfactory. "I believe Darling to be a perfectly honest girl and, so far as I know, respectable," this person had said offhandedly. "She has probably got into trouble through ignorance — that's the only explanation I can give you of the damned folly. But you'll understand I can't have her back while it's still fresh in the minds of the public. Later on she should have no difficulty in getting engagements."

Dr. Hardinge was thinking of all this when he looked into his sister's workroom one afternoon and saw Beauty Darling sitting by the window to catch the fading light before the lamp was lit. She was working swiftly and mechanically, and the face bent over an old sheet that she was patching was so dreamy as to betray the fact that her thoughts were very far away. Dr. Hardinge stood and looked at her for a moment with his keen, kindly eyes and noted the picture that she made, her delicate little profile outlined against the pale sky and the last glint of sunset catching the lights in the mass of curls that were so decently tied back nowadays. The line of the brows and the drooping lids was rarely lovely from an artistic point of view, and he marvelled a little that Nature should have made up a face so flawless and then painted it to perfection. As a rule, there is some defect to balance a preponderance of good looks, but

Dr. Hardinge really did not see where to find a fault in the girl's motionless head bent over her work. She had not heard him enter and never moved nor became conscious of his scrutiny. Then he coughed, and Beauty pricked her finger.

"I beg your pardon, doctor, I did not see you. Can I get anything for you?" she said as she looked up with a start.

"I looked in to see how you were getting on," he said with a directness that gave her no chance to feel uneasy. "I have hardly seen anything of you since you came here. Are you feeling quite strong again?"

"Yes, thank you," said Beauty, sucking her finger to prevent a stain on the sheet.

"In mind as well as body?"

She looked up beneath the deep fringe of her lashes with her blue eyes darkening. Her face said, "What do you mean?" though her lips still sucked the wounded finger in silence, and he answered it:

"Less at war with the world than before you found yourself in hospital, I mean."

She looked down at the sheet, fallen heedlessly on her knee, and a half stealthy look came over her face, as if she were feeling out for the mood in which she had attempted to take her own life. "I don't know!" she said simply.

"Would you like to tell me why you did it, child? Perhaps I could help to smooth the trouble."

He expected her to hesitate, and to have to help her with questions, until she admitted there having been a man in the case and confessed to some pitiable folly — he did not think it would be worse. But her answer,

when it did come, gave him such a shock that he nearly betrayed himself with an exclamation.

"I thought I was going to have a baby!"

"But, my dear child," he said gravely after a minute, mastering his surprise, "had you any reason for thinking so? Now, don't cry — I am not scolding you. I want to get to the root of this."

"We were very fond of each other,"— said Beauty between little sobbing breaths, and with no further introduction of the male element, "and I let him make a fool of me!"

"How long ago was this?" asked Dr. Hardinge quietly.

"About three weeks — oh, nearly a month now! He got a chill that day, and he's been very ill nearly ever since. I've never seen him except that night after, when he brought me home from the theatre, and his people are nursing him and I know they will take him away and never let him see me!"

Her confused speech told the doctor one thing at least — it had been a single slip, and not a continuance of immoral relations between them. He went on with his catechism, and in a very short while was certain that there was no chance of the girl having a child, and never had been. Her attempt on her own life had been the result of hysteria and sheer ignorance, and the wonder was that she should have been so unbalanced through mere imagination. But he recognized that George Mannering's illness had seemed rather like the vengeance of Providence, and that Beauty, left alone, had become panic-stricken. He reassured her as to her risk of becoming a mother, and took the opportunity to put her folly in a plain matter-

of-fact fashion before her, neither lecturing nor preaching, but speaking to her almost as if she had been a boy instead of a girl. Beauty listened with her eyes cast down, but it was obvious that she was neither overawed nor resentful, because she gradually told him more of her real history than she had ever confided to anyone since she ran away from home. He listened without any undue pity or horror to the list of her revelations, and gave her good sound advice at the end; but when he confided again in his sister he rubbed his grey hair up on end with something that was almost despair.

"The foundling daughter of a working woman — probably the offspring of vice or ungoverned impulse in the first place," he said. "Seduced, or rather violated, when she was only fourteen by some blackguard of a man lodging at their cottage — then a lurid experience on the stage. What chance is there for the Beauty Darlings of this world? Her face is a curse to her."

"And now this affair with the young man — did you hear his name?"

"Yes, and I know his people — big wholesale linen people in Belfast. The boy is being made a doctor, and they are intensely respectable and middle-class. As Beauty says, they will certainly never let him see her again if they can help it, once they find out."

"Has she attempted to see him?"

"She wrote once to his address, if not twice, but of course she has never had an answer. I know myself, by chance, that he has really been at death's door, and it will be weeks before he is about again, and then he will go away for his convalescence. Besides, Madge,

I really do not know that we have any right to try to renew the connexion between him and Beauty Darling if we could."

"Not for his sake — but hers!"

"He has not done her much harm, as it chances, except that, indirectly, he has lost her her place at the theatre. But that was really due to her utter ignorance and losing her head. If there were a child on the way perhaps we should be justified in bringing him to book. But as things are I don't know that he deserves to sink all his prospects in such an elementary venture as poor Beauty. Just think — if you or I had a boy should we not move heaven and earth to save him from such a marriage?"

"Y-yes — but he has a share of responsibility in the matter! The girl doesn't seem naturally a bad girl."

"Good Lord, *no!* poor little scrap. She seems to have fought like a little tigress for the liberty to go straight up to now, after that first man wronged her. He's the brute I should like to scrag!"

"My dear John, you really are like a schoolboy yourself when you get worked up!" said Miss Hardinge calmly. "Well, it's a pitiful affair altogether."

"It has the elements of hope in it to the catholic mind. The boy and girl do really seem to have fallen into Nature's trap through being fond of each other, and that, to an old heathen like myself, is better than if the girl had married one of these elderly satyrs for money and given him a chance to debauch her body and soul! The thing is, what are we to do for Miss Beauty Darling in the future? Have you spoken to her about embroidery?"

"Yes, but she says with truth, unfortunately, that even if she could get the work it is so badly paid that she would hardly be able to make a living. And as she has had two or three years' training on the stage it is better to do the thing she has learned. You know, I think," added Miss Hardinge honestly, "that she misses the young companionship, let alone the excitement of the life. Since her mind and body have recovered she has begun to feel it very dull here — she does not talk to the servants, and you and I can hardly be called society for her."

"It seems inevitable that she should go back to the stage," said the doctor, knitting his brows. "The only thing we can do for her is to get some sort of standard into her empty head, and rouse her ambition to rise in her profession. If she could get into a better set in the theatrical world she would take their tone at once, and unconsciously imitate them. There's an extraordinary difference in her since she came here even."

"She is not naturally a girl with low or vicious tastes," said Miss Hardinge shrewdly. "She is just too pliable, that is all. If she were a little child I should say it was one case in a thousand for adoption. She could be developed into anything anyone liked. But her chance has gone by."

"She was adopted — by the wrong class!" said the doctor dryly. "Well, we shall not be able to keep her here much longer, I foresee. I must go into accounts with Miss Beauty Darling, and see how much money she has. We must at least try to start her fair in London."

Beauty had as a fact four pounds and a few odd

shillings. She had calculated that she would save ten at least, at the beginning of the tour, but what with the unpaid weeks of rehearsal and her natural carelessness about money the salary had not come up to her expectations. It was a wonder that she had saved so much. Dr. Hardinge told her that her fare to London would cost her about thirty shillings, and there was a pound owing to her for all the mending she had done, which really amounted to some weeks' work. Added to this, he and his sister were making her a little present which would leave her with about seven pounds in hand, in case she found a difficulty in getting work. Then he asked her where she was going on her arrival in London.

Beauty did not know, and she had not any addresses to write to, except the one in Peckham, where she had lived with Mrs. Summers. Furthermore, she shrank from asking any of the Pantomime people to look for rooms for her, for she still felt the slight of her ostracism from them. Folly Bird or Mona Morley might get her a room if she wrote to them, unless they were on tour; but with some hesitation she said that she thought she had a friend who was more to be depended upon than they, and would not only make sure of a room, but meet her at Euston.

Who was this friend?

Michael Phayre.

Dr. Hardinge had not yet heard Phayre's name, and his sex was against him, but after an account of the acquaintance between him and Beauty, he wrote to Phayre himself, and received an answer that seemed to satisfy him.

"I really believe that Beauty has made one friend

who is genuine, and who will do her good rather than harm," he confided to his sister. "From all she tells me, the man has never made love to her — never started any such relationship between them — and she admits he talks in such a fashion that she hardly understands him."

"Well, that's in his favour, anyway!" said Miss Hardinge, with unconscious irony.

The doctor laughed outright. "I like his letters myself (we are having quite a correspondence), and he has promised to look after the girl as far as lies in his power. I quite realize that poor Beauty would not understand Phayre — he speaks another language."

"Will he meet her and get her a respectable lodging? — that is more to the point," said Miss Hardinge practically.

"Yes, he has promised to do that. And for the rest we must trust to the Travellers' Aid."

Neither the doctor nor his sister had the least intention of allowing Beauty to travel by herself and fall into the snare of making acquaintances on the way. For as long as they had her in their charge they shielded her as carefully as a girl of their own class, and threw out their protection as far as it would go on the way to London. There exists, for the safeguarding of ignorance and decency, a society called the Travellers' Aid, who for a minimum sum — I think it is eightpence an hour for the worker's time — will meet young women at stations and see them despatched into the right train, another worker meeting them again at their destination if desired. The sys-

tem forms a sort of chain, so that a girl starting from Dublin, as Beauty did, can be taken charge of until she is actually on the steamer, met at Holyhead, and put into the right train for London, and met yet again in London if necessary. The Society will even arrange, at the client's expense, to send some reliable person to travel with the girl all the way; but this Dr. Hardinge was not justified in affording, and did not think necessary. Michael Phayre would meet Beauty at Euston, and had promised to write of her safe arrival; between that and Dublin the Travellers' Aid would work their chain, and she would be carefully handed from one to another, with small chance of her going astray. The doctor had come into contact with the Society in his professional capacity, and trusted its methods.

So Beauty was sent home, as carefully as a parcel labelled "This side up with care." She thought the supervision rather a bore and was inclined to resent the paper — an official form — by which she was identified at each stage of the journey. But when she had been met and taken charge of by two or three worried but courteous ladies, who found her luggage and saw that she caught the right boat or train and was fed into the bargain, she began to like it. It was like having a maid or a courier to work for her, and Beauty, essentially idle, smiled with dewy blue eyes upon her chaperons and accepted all their ministrations with characteristic selfishness — it was easy and comfortable to stand still looking like a pretty, helpless child, and say, "Yes, I am to take the train for Euston, please. No, I don't know where it is. Dr. Hard-

inge said he would arrange for some one to show me." Owing to this system of supervision, and her being sea-sick on the boat, she had no adventures upon her journey, and arrived at Euston in the dusk of a March evening, with the dear sights and smells in her eyes and nose and the familiar roar coming up through every sense, and making her heart beat with a new sense of joy, for Beauty was a born Cockney. She had let down the window of the carriage, and leaned out to see the porters looking out for their "job," and running along by the still moving carriages, the rows of cabs, horse and motor, the passengers waiting for other trains by other platforms; and, as they moved slowly in, Michael Phayre's worn face seemed lifted towards her out of the crowd waiting for the Dublin train. The shabby, familiar aspect of the man gave her the one touch of home-coming she had lacked, and her eyes filled with sudden tears as she almost fell out of the train and ran towards him.

"Oh, Mr. Phayre!" she said, clinging to his arm with both hands. "This is *ripping!* Did Dr. Hardinge write to you? I expected the Traveller's Aid people again — and I've lots of things in the carriage — shall I get a porter? Oh, I am glad to be — back!"

"Say you're glad to be home, Beauty," said Michael quietly. "I am glad to see you again, childie; I've been worried over you. I should like you to feel that it *is* coming home!"

And as he turned, himself, to get her smaller packages, and arrange for the collection of her luggage,

and Beauty watched him, she drew a long breath of relief. Somehow for the first time for two or three months she felt quite safe.

CHAPTER VIII

MICHAEL PHAYRE had found a room for Beauty in New Cross, near to his own. It seemed to her oddly familiar to be back in the midst of the ringing, rolling tramcars, the cheap shops with their wares upon the pavements, and the smell of the streets in South London. I am inclined to think that each district of the Metropolis has its own especial flavour, even the West End. The City is faintly reminiscent of too much humanity, go where one will. It overreaches the petrol fumes and the disinfectants squirted in the roadway, and at all street corners, even in the shops, it meets you with the staleness of Mr. Kipling's "thrice-breathed airs." The North side is frankly nasty, and takes its tone from old clothes and second-hand furniture, but the South is chiefly vegetables. Whether the poorer classes live on cabbage on the South side, or throw their refuse in the gutter till such time as the dust-cart comes round, I have never been able to decide. There are a goodly quantity of hawkers' barrows certainly, but this will not entirely account for the over-boiled market-garden stench that stalks triumphant through the streets when the wind is quiet.

Beauty had learned the value of those hawkers' barrows when she lived in Peckham before, and the wisdom of buying from them at a penny cheaper than the shops, especially after dusk. When she lived with

Mrs. Summers she had frequently done the marketing, and done it thriftily; but now that she was "on her own" the thrift became skilled labour; for she was "out," in theatrical parlance, and the dread meaning of the word was beginning to dawn upon her. It had seemed very easy to get work either at Allonby's or the Satyr, or even the Sovereignty (a notoriously badly paid house), or through one of the Agents, when she left Dublin, but it was a different story in London. Allonby's and the Satyr were in the full swing of popular productions, and their casts were full. There did not seem to be any tours going out, and even the Agents shrugged their shoulders and said there was "nothing doing." Beauty learned what it feels like to wait hour after hour without food in that outer room beyond the Agent's office, where there are not enough chairs, and every one is afraid to go out and get something to eat lest they should miss their chance of seeing him. In her first experience of Bent and Bent she had gone with Kittie Smart, secure in the advantage of her already settled engagement; but Beauty found that when she was on her own merits it was not easy to pass the closed door. She had also to bear the patronage of the office-boy, and not flinch when his unwholesome face was thrust close to her own, or his familiar hand rested on her shoulder. There would be no chance of seeing his master if she did not endure it and she had to stand amongst the scarecrows of men and women whose faces and dresses, like a distorted likeness of her own, made her shudder. Should she ever come to this, when her prettiness was gone and she was no longer of any use even to kick up a naughty skirt and make eyes at the

gallery? That woman with the painted face must once have been pretty, though now the red and white were so much a mask to hide wrinkles that the original was almost lost. Their clothes, too, mostly soiled finery, were a mocking imitation of the smart chorus girl in her prosperous days. Now and then a man or woman of a better class, more decently dressed, would appear quietly amongst the rag, tag, and bobtail; but their eyes, if they chanced to meet Beauty's, seemed to hold a reflection of the despair in her own. They also were "out," and their experience taught them the grim tragedy staring them in the face as week after week passed and showed them no hope of work.

Perhaps her late association with Dr. Hardinge and his sister, and the quiet orderliness of their home, made the theatrical world more sordid to Beauty's eyes, for with her usual impressionableness she was yet under the influence of her late environment. Her hair was still tied away from her face, and she still wore the dark, plain clothes that made her look "almost like a lady." Possibly this appearance rather went against her in her application for work in Musical Comedy; she looked so quiet and well bred that in the Agent's language she would have been summed up as Legitimate Drama or Comedy, or one of the Shakespeare people, seeing her in the waiting-room. Even the lodging which Michael Phayre had found her dissatisfied her by its shabby ugliness, after the atmosphere of home in Dr. Hardinge's house. It was a combined room, with a bed in a distant corner, and a dusty curtain to draw over the dressing-table and washhandstand. The other portion of the apartment was furnished with a rickety sofa and chairs of an un-

speakable dinginess, and a centre table that always had an artificial indiarubber plant in a pot on it when Beauty's meals were not in evidence. She hated that plant. It reminded her somehow of Mrs. Darling's wonderful aspidistra. When Michael Phayre came in one afternoon to see how she was getting on, he found her pulling the forlorn furniture about and thrusting it into fresh positions without consulting her landlady.

"What are you doing, Beauty?" he asked with a humorous twinkle in his eyes. "It looks like a spring-cleaning!"

"I wish it were!" said Beauty disdainfully, wrinkling up her nose. "The whole place is choking with dust the minute you try to move anything."

"Well, what are you trying to do, then?"

"It is all so ugly!" said the girl, standing in the middle of the disarranged table and chairs with a pouting underlip. "I thought if I pushed the table into the window and moved the sofa round to the fireplace it wouldn't look quite so beastly. But it's no use."

Michael's eyes had a sudden brightness, like a flash of comprehension, as they rested on her. He had been to see Beauty once or twice when she was sharing rooms with other girls, and he had found the domestic administration of those households quite as slatternly as Beauty's present quarters, but Beauty had never complained.

"Have you tried to dust or scrub the room at all?" he said. "It would be much better if we started clean before we tried to improve it. Look here, I'm an old hand at scrubbing and cleaning. Let's ask your

landlady for a pail of water and a broom, and have a turn out. I'll do the scrubbing if you'll dust."

"I don't think she'll let us," said Beauty dubiously. She wanted the room to feel more like Miss Hardinge's, but the hard work did not appeal to her.

Michael, however, was firm on that point. He foraged over the house until he found a dirty maid-of-all-work (the landlady was out or he might have met with more opposition), and robbed her of a broom and a pail and some old rags that did duty for dusters. Then he took off his coat and threw open the window, subjecting the frowzy room to a more thorough turning-out than it probably had had for years. He could not take up the carpet, but he scrubbed all round it, and with the furniture mostly in the passage he cleared its surface of accumulated dust; while Beauty, spurred to emulation, dusted and rubbed and cleaned until even the greasy walls felt better to touch. In the course of their vigorous onslaught Michael found that the covering of the sofa was only tied on for the sake of modernity, and underneath was a faded but rather harmonious woollen rep.

"Look here, Beauty! Here's a find!" he said cheerfully. "We'll take this beastly cover off, and if you keep this old thing brushed you'll find it will look quite respectable. Are the chairs the same? Yes, thank Heaven! Now there's only that table-cover and the mantelpiece."

The mantel-border — that touch of gentility that lurks in the dreariest apartments! — was so toned with dirt and dust that it had reached a uniform drabness, and was finished with a cheap ball fringe that made Beauty shiver to touch. Michael came and looked at

it with his hands in his lean pockets. Then he removed two sixpenny-halfpenny vases and a cheap clock that did not go, and put them gingerly on the table before he took hold of the board on which the thing was mounted with both hands and gently rocked it. It had always been unsteady, and after one dexterous twist it came away without any further trouble, revealing an inoffensive shelf of painted wood beneath.

"That will wash at least," said Michael coolly, depositing the discarded drapery in a distant corner. "If we are asked, Beauty, we will say that it broke down under our energy in brushing. But I don't think we need trouble Mrs. Perkins about it at all. Now if you put your Beasts out here, and I try to mend that clock, you will be quite cheerful."

The "Beasts" referred to were a collection of toy animals that she had gathered together while at Allonby's. All the girls had toys or knicknacks of some sort, given them by some one about the theatre or private friends, and kept there for luck. Beauty did not confine herself to any one animal, and "Beauty and her Beasts" was to become a byword by-and-by.

Her eyes brightened. She had not had the heart to bring out this collection of china animals since she left the theatre, but they had now become quite a formidable array, and would fill the shelf.

"What are you going to do with the vases?" she asked dubiously.

"Leave them in the bottom of that cupboard in the corner. We'll put all the most awful things there. I tell you what — I've got an old piece of drapery in my rooms that I'm not using. It's not very splendid,

but it's better than that dirty tablecloth. We'll roll that up and put it in the cupboard too, and I'll lend you the drapery to throw over the table."

When the room was finished it was certainly more habitable than it had been for many decades of lodgers, and a great refuge to Beauty from the sordidness of the neighbourhood and her own discouragement. For her circumstances darkened rather than otherwise in the weeks that followed, and as her slender stock of money melted away she began to have that haunted feeling which has no vanishing-point except the streets. Michael Phayre could not help her. He lived so close to poverty himself that his few gifts to the girl meant personal sacrifices of which she did not dream. But she knew she could only afford the combined room, cheap though it was, for another week or so, and then what was to become of her? Such girls as Beauty have one market open; and her upbringing caused her to revolt from the abyss more fiercely than if she had been the daughter of a duchess. No class is so condemnatory of prostitution as the respectable poor, and there were many daughters of Mayfair who would have looked with more reckless philosophy to such an escape from starvation than Beauty Darling with her twice-sullied youth. To slip from ignorance, to slip for love, to slip even for vice, as she had known women to do, was excusable to her; but to make a trade of her womanhood was ghastly beyond words. And still the stage-door remained closed to her and the Agent said, "No business doing, dear!" with callous indifference to her desperate need.

Yet probably this was the period of Beauty's highest mental development. Removed from the influence of

the theatre, and the older girls whom she imitated, she was thrown back on an earlier training and her late association with Dr. Hardinge and his sister. Michael Phayre was her most constant companion, and he lent her his own books to read, so that her mind did not starve with her body. The plastic, adaptable nature absorbed the better teaching and ideals, and some sort of character began faintly to form in Beauty Darling, so that the great blue eyes were beautiful in expression as well as mere form and colouring. If she had been asked, she would have said with a shudder that this was the most awful time of her life, and she would hardly like to look back to it once it was over. But if she could have again seen the face that looked at her out of the cracked looking-glass in Mrs. Perkin's combined room she would have found something there that she had missed before.

Her theatrical friends had not entirely deserted her, and still welcomed her when they met by chance in old haunts — in Maiden Lane outside an Agent's, or if she went in to see a play "on her card," which means that an actor or actress giving a known name at a box-office will be passed in free. It being part of her profession to see a piece before she applied for a part in it, Beauty was obliged to go to plays now and then, though she would rather have stayed away. She was humiliated by the position, and shrank from meeting old friends. The stigma of her attempted suicide still hung about her, and she had been "out" for so long that it was evident that no one wanted her. Then she was shabby and hungry, and living in a low-class neighbourhood miles away from theatrical centres. She was ashamed to ask her old friends to come and

see her, and had not told anyone but a few intimates her address. It is so easy to fall out of the race and be forgotten, and what with the ill-starred Pantomime engagement and then her stay with the Hardinges, it seemed to Beauty that in four or five months nobody even remembered that she had been on the salary list at Allonby's. She was like a beginner, trying to get her foot upon the boards, and faced with the blank disappointment that comes to inexperience.

When her money had been reduced to the last pound she began to look amongst her small possessions for such things as would be saleable, for she was paying five shillings a week for her room, and reduce expenditure as she would, she found it impossible to live on less than seven shillings a week for food. It was a cold May, but Beauty had given up a fire long ago, and spent the evenings shivering in her golf-cape until she could get warm in bed. Now it looked as if even the golf-cape would have to go, for it might be worth another five or even seven shillings, and she must do the best she could with a much-worn jacket. Her only other saleable possession was a little gold brooch that George Mannering had given her, and that she had not returned because there had been no definite break with George — they had just drifted out of each other's lives, partly because Beauty had not the tenacity to keep up the connexion as Kitty Smart or one of the Satyr girls might have done. She valued the brooch both for sentimental reasons and because she liked wearing it, and flinched as much from parting with it as from the impending visit to the pawnbroker's, looking with eyes that were tragic at its familiar glint at her throat. Why not? For Beauty's strongest emo-

tions were for manifestations of prettiness. She saw the good to be gained in this world as material, in such things as furs and silks and jewellery, or pleasant sights and soft living. To lose the least of these was her tragedy, and she possessed so little!

She was forced by necessity into business habits not native to her, and under Michael Phayre's tuition learned to limit herself to so much per day for food and to resist the temptation of a healthy appetite and a frame that was still growing. Michael had learned the same lesson many hard years since, and it was evidenced in his spare frame and that wistful hunger in his eyes that one sees in the eyes of a lost dog. For his starved body hampered his art-loving soul and starved that too in that it hindered him from putting a healthy strength into his work. A loaf cost twopence, butter a penny, cheese a penny, vegetables or green salad a penny; tea was expensive, insomuch that the water had to be boiled, and Mrs. Perkins would not always make it for her lodger, while spirit stoves were out of the question. Paid for at the nearest eating-house tea cost threepence, including a slice of thick bread and butter; but this could not be afforded twice a day if Beauty were to eat meat. So Michael figured it out for her, and helped her to make her purchases of cheese and butter in bulk as being cheaper, allowancing herself so much a day. If she exceeded the allowance she must go hungry at the end of the week. After a long tramp to the Agents, or sitting out an afternoon or evening performance, Beauty found it so hard to resist food in more expensive neighbourhoods than New Cross that she took to going with no more than her tram fare in her pocket, and very often she

saved that by walking. On one of these occasions she had been the round of the Agents with the usual discouraging result, and after a bun and a glass of milk at a cheap shop she went in to Allonby's on her card to see the new piece again. It was very much the same as those in which she had taken part, and either her fatigue, or the insufficient food of the past weeks, made her stupid, for the lights danced before her eyes and she could hardly follow the words — plot, of course, there was little or none. By the time she came out of the theatre her head was aching, and she felt sick for a cup of tea; but she had only twopence with her, and to get home at all she must walk as far as Waterloo. As she turned with dragging steps into the Strand she nearly ran up against a girl coming towards her and looking up with a half-surly apology — for she was really overdone — she vaguely recognized a familiar face.

"Miss Darling," said the girl, catching her by the arm, and Beauty realized that she must have swayed a little. "My dear, are you ill? You look so white and tired. I haven't seen you for ages. Do come and have tea with me!"

It was Meta Chumleigh, a girl whom she had known slightly at Allonby's, and Beauty had never been so glad to see the tall supple figure and frank face before. They had never been intimate, for Meta was in another dressing-room and of a different type to the Lilliput Troupe. She was a very quiet girl, and came of a different class, her father having been a naval officer who had died when only a commander and left his widow to be supported by a nominal pension and the efforts of their one daughter. Meta did

not begin to talk until they were safely ensconced in a corner of an A.B.C., where the smell of hot cake and steaming urns made Beauty's empty chest literally contract. Even then Meta pretended a hunger she certainly did not feel to countenance poor Beauty's onslaught upon the food before her, and this was not only due to the fact that she was Meta Chumleigh, with a little more tact and intuition than the rest of the girls who had been in No. 6 at Allonby's. Any of them, the whole Lilliput Troupe or the Satyr girls, would have done as much or more, and it was the result of her theatrical experiences as much as natural kindliness that helped Meta to understand the situation. There are no kinder hearts in the world, I think, than those that beat under the abominable finery of the chorus girl — no better humanity than what may be found behind the paint and powder and the bistred eyes.

"I am on at the Roscius," Meta explained when her own cake and bread and butter had disappeared and it seemed safe to talk and let her guest still eat. "I am only in the street-scene and one or two others — walking on. But I get a guinea a week. It's not so much as in Musical Comedy, but — but I like the life better." She hesitated a little over this, for fear Beauty should be hurt; but Beauty was too much wrapped up in her present distress to think about the insinuation.

"I'm awfully down on my luck!" she confessed, with a faint laugh. "Been out for three months."

"I *am* sorry! I was out for some time after I left Allonby's, and I began to think I should never get work again. But I did have a special week or so.

If you'll give me your address I'll let you know the minute I hear of anything — one does sometimes, you know. Or may I come and see you?"

"I'm in a beastly hole," said Beauty with her blue eyes brimming. The relief from hunger and tire, and the unexpected sympathy, threatened to break down her self-control, never of a very robust quality. "I'm down at New Cross. Will you really come? I haven't seen a soul for ages — I've hardly had tea to offer them!"

"Never mind about the tea — we'll go out and have it at a shop. There must be some cafe within a mile or so." (Even Meta had learned the theatrical pronunciation of that word.)

She walked with Beauty as far as her tram, as if loath to part from her, and sent her home warmed and comforted. Meta was earning a guinea a week, as she said, out of which she had to help her mother and clothe and partly feed herself; but before she parted with Beauty Darling she had forced her to accept a loan of ten shillings, of which she saw not the slightest chance of repayment, besides paying for the tea. This was entirely theatrical, the only difference in her generosity and a girl like Kittie Smart being that the latter would probably have been reduced to borrow in her turn of another girl in the dressing-room at the Satyr, the usual system of helping one's neighbour, on the Stage, being that of robbing Peter to pay Paul; but the Recording Angel does not strike balances on the commercial lines of this world. Meta's loan was purely one of self-denial, and it is tolerably certain that she suffered for it in the weeks that followed.

She kept her promise, however, and came out to New Cross to see Beauty in her cold and forlorn little room, and merrily insisted on taking her out to tea for the fun of sampling a "cafe" in the neighbourhood. There entered a factor into the proceedings, however, for which Meta had not bargained, and which filled her with genuine surprise. For just as they were setting out from the dilapidated house where Beauty lived they were met almost on the doorstep by a young man who lifted his hat with a quiet, comprehensive glance at Beauty's visitor.

"I was just coming round to see if you would have tea with me," he said. "But I'm afraid you've accepted another invitation."

"This is my friend, Mr. Phayre," said Beauty, but without any of the consciousness with which one introduced a "best boy." "Miss Chumleigh asked me to come out and have tea with her—" She hesitated slightly, regretful at the chance of losing the tea through the obligation of accepting Michael's hospitality.

"Suppose we all go and have it together?" he said easily, shaking hands with Meta. "I had no time or chance to get luncheon to-day, so I am pining for tea. I feel inclined to scream 'tea' at the top of my voice all down New Cross, until some one brings it to me! Have you ever felt like that, Miss Chumleigh?"

"I always feel like that about three o'clock," said Meta gravely. "And it goes on till four, when I break down and either get it or scream as you describe. The Dresser at the theatre where I am walk-

ing on *runs* now, about five minutes to, she is so afraid of the noise I make."

He looked round at her quickly. "You are on the Stage, too?" he said.

"I am not very far on," said Meta serenely. "I wish I were! Miss Darling and I were at Allonby's together."

It occurred to Beauty with some misty surprise that Mr. Phayre and Meta were getting on quite well together, as if there were some natural affinity between them. She had always regarded them both as rather odd and dull at times, and perhaps that was it — some natural stupidity that suited each with the other. But she did not care to be left out of the conversation, and was a little inclined to sulk at finding herself less in touch with either of her companions than they did with themselves. They quoted books she had never read, and they noticed the same things going on round them while having tea, as if by instinct. Beauty wanted to talk about the Stage and her own ill-luck. It did not interest her in the least that three people at the next table were like some "mad tea-party" of which the others spoke, nor did she know what they meant by the Dormouse, the March Hare, and the Hatter. She said openly at last, "I think it's you two who are the March Hares — you're mad enough!"

"I shall go home and make a drawing of a Muchness," said Michael, laughing. "It is evidently my *métier*. Who knows? It might lay the foundation of all my fortunes."

"I know exactly what it would be like," said Meta

dreamily. "It's the shape of a leg of mutton and it's pea-green!"

"Excuse me, Miss Chumleigh — it's bright ochre!"

"What are you talking about?" said Beauty, pouting. "I want some more tea!"

Meta, with some penitence, poured it out, and tried to keep her thoughts from answering Michael Phayre's quite so quickly. But the more she looked at and listened to him the more she marvelled. The spare figure and worn face had nothing whatever in common with Beauty Darling to her mind, try as she might to find the connexion, unless it were the attraction of opposites. "He is a gentleman, and he understands!" she said to herself for the fifth time. "I should like to see his work."

Michael paid for his own tea, but he did not attempt to pay for the girls too. Meta had asked Beauty to tea, and he could not have afforded the three payments. That is one of the small pin-pricks of poverty. But being all three Bohemians the matter simplified itself. They walked back with Beauty to her lodging, and then Michael offered to see Miss Chumleigh to her tram, promising to go back afterwards to have the deferred chat with his first friend. Beauty did not mind — as he was coming back. She was only jealous of her obvious rights.

"If you do hear of anything that would mean work for her," Phayre said, as he and Meta walked down to the stopping place of the cars together, "I am sure you will let her know, won't you? It is growing rather a desperate situation."

"Yes, I will, indeed. Mr. Phayre, are you a Socialist?"

"No. Why did you ask?"

"Because sometimes I think that I am growing into one. It is so dreadful to know that we can't work when we would!"

"I think," said Michael slowly, "that the work is always there — if we will take it. Just now it seems as if Beauty were really being defrauded of a right to live; but if Justice were on her defence she might plead that Beauty had thrown her own chances away and gambled with her luck. Even now she might have got some other employment if she had chosen to try — but she will only attempt to get stage work."

"Yes, I see —" Meta turned away her face as if from some recollection. "But sometimes you may lose your place through no fault of your own. Anyhow, I will keep my ears open, and help her in every way I can."

"Yes, but, Miss Chumleigh, you must not let her borrow of you," he said with unexpected firmness. "I know how generous all girls in your position are, but it is not fair on you and it is not really good for Beauty. If I had let her she would have written to some very good friends she made in Dublin and asked for help from them, and they had already helped her to the utmost of their power. And as long as she could go on borrowing she would be content to drift, and the habit would grow on her more and more. You know," he said with his strained smile, "it is not everybody who can borrow. And it is on the whole a dangerous facility."

"Yes," she said in a lower voice. "I see!"

"If you will come and see her, and keep in touch with her, you will do her far more good than by lending her money. Help her by the chance of an engagement, by all means, but spur her into action and urge her on to try, rather than make it possible for her to sit down with her hands in her lap."

"How well you know her!" she said with some wonderment.

For the first time he flushed, the uncomfortable red of manhood, but he answered with simple directness, "Yes, I know her very well."

"She is very, very pretty!" said Meta with genuine earnestness. "You do not know what pleasure it used to give me merely to look at her."

"She has the most perfect face of her type that I ever saw," said Michael candidly. "Both the lines of it and the colouring are most beautiful. Here is your tram — please don't get lost, or we might never see you again, and it has been a very great pleasure."

It had been a very great pleasure to Meta too, though she did not say so. The word "affinity" has been so misconstrued that it has come to have an ill meaning between the sexes; but where it really exists it brings one of the purest and most human of pleasures. Meta was frankly sorry if she did not encounter Michael Phayre in her pilgrimages to New Cross, and held out the right hand of friendship without any more complicated feeling to spoil her pleasure. Once he took both girls to his queer attic of a studio, and showed them his work; but the visit was not a success from Beauty's point of view because it was too much of a success for Meta. She was beginning to see that there were other attractions besides the

pretty face that she had thought irresistible, and a quickened sense told her that Meta was appreciating and sympathizing as she could not do. It made her dissatisfied with herself, and a little jealous, though not in the elementary fashion she would have felt about George Mannering. Nevertheless she grew more and more silent, and by the time they had walked together to her rooms as usual the conversation was restricted to the two others, and she was struggling with a desire to cry. The long weeks of failure to find work had left her with a sense of defeat and humiliation, and this last experience of her own attractions failing her was the straw that broke the camel's back. Michael went to the tram as usual with Meta Chumleigh, and when he returned to Beauty's lodging, as he had promised, he found her sitting listlessly by the empty fireplace with her face buried in her hands. She was inarticulate in her trouble, and it took all his intuition to realize that the struggle seemed suddenly at its blackest and too hard for her. For some minutes he said nothing, but only patted the curly head with his kind, thin hand, and let her feel that a comrade in misfortune respected her breakdown. The only thing that perhaps escaped him was that she feared to lose his allegiance also, and that the joy of his friendship with Meta had been this other girl's undoing.

"I want you to do me a favour, Beauty," he said after a while. "I'm too hard up myself for a model, and I've an order for some black-and-whites for a weekly paper. I know you hate posing, but if you will stand for me for a few minutes and let me make

a rough drawing of you here, it will be awfully good of you. I've brought my tools —"

But before he could produce the well-worn pencil and stump and sketch-book she had flung off his hand and was on her feet, amazing him with a new phase of excitement and emotion.

"I can't stand to-night — I couldn't bear it! I hate the very sight of your damned tools — it brings back something I want to forget — if you draw me now I shall go mad."

He looked at her splendid little face with the fury in it as if stricken dumb. He had always wondered a little at her prejudice against artists', or models' work, but Beauty had been consistently reticent over her past experiences. Perhaps the confession she had already made to Dr. Hardinge had loosened her tongue; perhaps her present emotional mood was responsible for what followed, for she suddenly began to speak, and never in all her stage life was she so simply effective as standing before Michael Phayre in her shabby black frock with her hands twisted together behind her back. This was a trick of Beauty's, and threw the lines of her figure into unconscious prominence. Most women who grip their hands throw them outwards; Beauty threw them back, and only her tense, strained body told of their restless clasp. Her thick hair made a frame for her lifted face, and the low line of jaw running to the chin was beautiful in its severity. The tragedy of the brows and the curve of the lips struck Michael as never before.

"There was a man — an artist — when I was a

kid," she panted. "Just before I ran away from home and got taken on at Allonby's—" (she had never admitted running away to him before. He waited for further revelations). "He came and stayed in our cottage because he wanted to paint me—he told me so afterwards. Mother wouldn't let him at first, but he got round her—he could get round anyone." The tensely strung body shuddered with utter revulsion, and a look of fear crept into the blue eyes that made Michael want to hide his own. "He used to get hold of me and ask me to come into his room," she said huskily, as if the old eerie feeling of unnatural power haunted her yet. "I did it at last, and then—you know!"—Her voice broke down, but suddenly gathered force again and she burst out afresh, so that she startled her listener. "I hated him when it was too late—I couldn't bear the thought of him—he was middle-aged—he made me creep. Oh, how I *hate* the touch of old men!"

Michael could not bear uncleanness. He pushed the thought from himself, and tried to push it from her by a side issue.

"I won't ask you to let me draw you again, Beauty. Tell me about your mother. Why did you run away?"

"She wasn't really my mother." The girl spoke sullenly. All the terrible force seemed to have gone out of her figure with that last outcry, and she turned from him listlessly. "She brought me up, that's all. I was what she called a come-by-chance—a bastard, I suppose."

Michael frowned a little at the relish of the last term. He recognized that Beauty had a sneaking

pride in her unknown parentage, for if no one could say that it was superior to the class in which she had lived, they could not, by the same token, prove that it was inferior. She had boasted to him of her possible origin before.

"I suppose your foster-mother was kind to you?" he hazarded in the gentlest reproof.

"She brought me up," was all that Beauty would allow. "When she found out about that beast she was going to beat me. So I ran away."

"And you have never written to her since — never let her know where you were?"

"I meant to go back — some day," Beauty admitted, a trifle shamefacedly. "But she didn't want me. She could have found me easily enough, I suppose, if she had tried. She said she'd turn me into the gutter I came from, and I expect she was glad when I went."

Michael sighed a little. The sores of life seemed rather too deep for him to heal. "Still I think you ought to have gone back and told her what you were doing, or at least have written," he said. "When her anger was cooler she would have listened to you, and understood how it all happened. She had kept and clothed you all your life, Beauty. You owe it to her that you were rescued from the gutter anyhow and not sent to the workhouse."

The girl did not answer. She was leaning her elbows on the hard wood of the newly revealed mantelshelf, and her face in her hands. The back of her head was towards Michael, who could see nothing but the slightly built figure and the bright curling hair. Over Beauty's shoulder looked the amazing

face of a sky-blue cat — one of the Beasts that now adorned the shelf; he could see the creature's cheerful grin, as if it found some hideous humour in the situation. Beauty called it "Cuddle-puddles," as he knew.

"I never cared a damn about him!" she said indistinctly, with sudden incoherence. "If I had I'd have stayed and braved it out; she might have beat me black and blue! It was different in Dublin. I did love Georgie — but he's never written — and his people took him away — and if I could have seen him once —"

The sobs came now in good earnest. Michael Phayre walked slowly across the room and looked down into the street below the dusky window. The May evening was still light enough to show him the barrows where the hawkers plied a busy trade, from roots of Marvel of Peru to bootlaces and old songs; and to and fro on the pavement and in the roadway went still busier men and women with anxious, heavy faces unlightened by any glimpse of a more leisured life. He knew it all so well — his existence for nearly nine years had been passed amongst such scenes as this, in an intimate poverty that had made it a very real and despairing thing to him. Only his work had raised him out of the surroundings whose monotony threatened to drag him down — that and the steadfast hope of a future, where he might have the right to breathe a purer air than that of New Cross, to mix with a class that was native to him rather than the sordid crowd there below. It was the mentality for which he starved rather than the physical association. He had just gone on in the

certainty that his work was honest, and that some day the people he wanted to understand him would understand. But suppose he took a fresh burden on his shoulders in the shape of a wife from that class below, he would never reach the cultured atmosphere he craved. The constant association with such a girl as Beauty Darling, for instance, meant patient years of struggle before he could even hope that she might meet him half-way; there could be no hope of that precious mutual understanding and communion that had seemed to Michael so perfect a thing that it made marriage almost too sacred for words. The temptation was by no means one of the flesh; it looked, indeed, rather like an obligation than a temptation — the possible power to shield and raise a nature too weak and ignorant to raise itself — a nature that wanted love, however, even in its simplest form, and that in its loneliness would turn to him did he so offer himself. . . . He looked down at the costers' stalls and saw all that he had fought and striven for floating away from him. A woman was bargaining for a pansy root to put in a flower-pot or on an airless window-sill and choke the gracious life out of the flower, no doubt. He breathed a sigh of actual relief when she put it down and did not buy it. All the truth of Nature and God that he had humbly hoped to gather to himself through the medium of his art, giving it out again as the sun gives life, seemed to be dragging him with cords of steel away from the mere contemplation of such sacrifice. . . . And there was Beauty Darling by the empty fireplace, crying noisily, like all her class, and very friendless. He came back slowly across the

room and stood beside her, looking down into the empty grate and not touching her.

"Cry it out, Beauty," he said in an odd, strained voice. "If it's worth crying over. Did you love him very badly, poor child?"

Beauty nodded and choked. She was really very sorry for herself, and it was the more wonderful that she had been silent on the subject for so long. "I've wr-written to him thr-three times, and he's ne-never answered!" she gasped.

"Probably he never got the letters," said Phayre quietly. "If he did — Well, never mind, Beauty," he added hastily as her sobbing grew more hysterical. "We'll take it for granted that he is not worth writing to again and try to face the future without him. I must go home now, but I'll come again on Thursday, and then — perhaps I shall have some new scheme for your future."

He had so often given her difficulties his time and consideration, and had done his best to obtain temporary work for her, that the last words were natural enough. Yet she lifted her head quickly and looked at him with blurred blue eyes in her new comprehension. Michael Phayre had never made love to her — had never kissed her except that once when she was going to Dublin, and she knew with some awed surprise that her face was only a pleasant thing to look at to him, as the blue sky or the daisies in the grass — not a cup of red wine to stir his veins as it did those of other men. Beauty knew he did not love her, even in the elementary fashion in which men had done for some short space; but she knew also that he was going to suggest their marrying, and she was so forlorn that

she felt she would be thankful to have him always at hand to stand between her and the rest of the large world that had somehow overflowed the comfortable circle of the footlights. They would be just as poor together as apart, but it would not be nearly so miserable for her. For Michael she did not think. His straight, spare shoulders had been ready for the responsibility of her troubles so often that to weight them permanently seemed natural. It was only today, when she had seen him more occupied with Meta Chumleigh than with herself, that she had realized how much she depended upon him, and the mere suspicion of his reverting to some one else had frightened her. It was some vague comfort to think that after all she was paramount; for if he did not want to marry her he need not ask her — and he had thought of asking her at least.

Michael Phayre, walking home to his own bare rooms — the barer for certain little comforts he had transported to Beauty's — threaded his way amongst the barrows and tried to fix his mind upon the stars. A woman was screaming out personalities at a girl in a slipshod blouse and a shawl over her head, and the girl had a horrible look of Beauty, though she was neither so young nor so pretty. As he passed, Michael heard her laugh — and his fine mouth set itself rather painfully the while he still looked steadily up to the evening sky and the few stars he could just begin to see, imagining those he could not. They were all there — Aldeboran, Orion, B Centuri, the big planets of Charles's Wain — there somewhere, even though human beings round him were turning earth into a dung-heap. Meta Chumleigh's face rose

on his sensitive memory in sharp contrast to that of the girl with the shawl over her head — the girl who had laughed; and he tried not to wonder what it would be like to hear such a laugh in one's own home.

. . . . . .

It was on the very next day that Beauty called at Allonby's.

She had been there many times, with an effort to see the Manager himself, and had once or twice seen Hughes (who had by no means forgotten the black mark against her name), and oftener still been brusquely told that those in authority were not "seeing people" at all. She had given up calling in despair, but her renewed acquaintance with Meta Chumleigh had roused the spirit of emulation in her again, and sent her back on a forlorn hope; for if Meta had overcome her ill-luck and obtained an engagement, though only to walk on, it seemed incredible to Beauty that she herself should fail. Michael Phayre's new attitude with regard to her too — though she did not realize it — lent her a new courage. If no one would see her, and she could not get a shop (engagement), she had still the comfortable feeling at the back of her mind that she might marry and have a man on whom to depend. It really was a comfortable feeling, and had a mental effect like warm wine upon her as she entered the theatre, so that her question to the stage-doorkeeper as to whether Mr. Allonby was there was more confident than usual. The doorkeeper, Hollis, recognized her, and nodded as to an old acquaintance.

"Hulloa, Miss Darling, it's you, is it?" he said familiarly.

"Yes, it's me," said Beauty, not particularly offended. "Is Papa about?"

"Want to see him? I think he's somewhere in the House. Here, Tommy"—he called to a boy in the employment of the theatre—"go and ask if Mr. Allonby can see Miss Darling."

Beauty's heart beat high with sudden hope. She had never had a chance to see Edgar Allonby himself since that time two years since when he had been taken ill, and it was during his absence that Hughes had dismissed her. He had always been kind to her, and if she could only contrive to have a personal interview, without Hughes or anyone else preventing her, she might represent her desperate plight so that he would take her on again. Her letters to him had always been answered by his secretary, Lewis, who had never been a special friend of Beauty's, and had possibly only been officially reported to Allonby as another application when there were no vacancies. It was with difficulty that she controlled her eagerness so as to appear unconcerned while she waited and listened to the doorkeeper's gossip, and it was an effort to return suitable replies. But in a few minutes Tommy returned and said that Mr. Allonby would see her, and Beauty followed him with a throbbing heart to the well-known room.

Nothing had changed. The heavy curtains still hung over the windows and mitigated the May sunshine, but the applicants' chair was placed to face the light, so that the Manager could judge of her possibilities, whereas his own had its back to the window

and left him in shadow at his writing-desk. The high fender with its cushioned top still stood before the fire — it was a chilly day — and the grand piano with its suggestion of the real business of trying voices occupied the middle of the room. Even the tray with its whisky and soda was still within easy distance of the Manager's hand on a side-table. Allonby himself showed traces of his illness; he was thinner, and the broad, clean-shaven face was more lined; but he looked as capable and vigorous as he had two or three years ago, as he held out a cordial hand to his old protégée.

"Well, my dear, and how are you?" he said, putting her into the chair facing the light while he still held her hand. Beauty was immediately conscious of her shabby, respectable black frock, the plain straw hat, and her hair tied back with its schoolgirl bow. She was as little like an Allonby girl as she had been when she first came into that room, and just now she was troubled to know that her face was thinner and whiter than usual, and that her eyes were faintly shadowed from last night's tears.

"I am rather down on my luck, Mr. Allonby," she said with a faint laugh. "I can't get anything to do."

"H'm!" said the Manager, with a calculating sound behind his closed lips. He was looking steadily at Beauty from his vantage-point, and she wondered why. Her looks seemed to have failed her lately. "Business is slack," he said. "There's nothing much doing. What was your last engagement?"

"I was in Pantomime last winter —" she hesitated, and flushed painfully, wondering if he had heard of

her escapade. "But I broke down — I was ill —"

"Why did you leave us?" he asked abruptly.

"Mr. Hughes did not want me in the new piece — it was when you were ill. I was awfully sorry!"

Beauty spoke eagerly, hoping to make good her position; but her hopes were rudely dispelled by Allonby's next words.

"I know — you were late one night, and then impertinent to Mr. Hughes, and we do not excuse either of those faults at Allonby's. Then you went to Dublin and did not like that, and after three or four months of Pantomime there was a very unpleasant story connected with your name — eh? I know a great deal more about my girls than they think, Miss Darling!"

Beauty gasped, and relapsed into silence as the only safe refuge. She had no excuse ready, and she felt a little frightened of those shrewd eyes in the wide, hairless face. Then suddenly she remembered the dreary little room at New Cross and her own hopeless outlook, and desperation drove her into one last plea.

"I've been out three or four months, Mr. Allonby, and I don't know what to do to earn my living — I'd go out in a fit-up crowd gladly — can't you give me *anything* to do?"

She turned her great hungry eyes on the controller of her fate and they were bright with fear. Allonby sat up a little sharply, as if he had met with something he had not expected, and his tone altered.

"Come! come!" he said. "I hope it's not as bad as that. Girls do get into tight corners sometimes, but we don't let them kill themselves. Why didn't you come to me before?"

"I have — often — but I couldn't see you."

"Well!" He made a mental note that was not in favour of some of his staff. "I will see what can be done for you. You are an old member of Allonby's, though not very old otherwise. What is your age now?"

"Seventeen — nearly eighteen," said Beauty, forgetting what she had told him four years since; but if he noticed it he did not say so. Instead, he got up and went to the piano, running his hands over the keys with a soft skilled touch that no one would have expected from his blunt fingers. "Come and try your voice," he said, and Beauty rose obediently and stood beside him while he played the prelude of a well-known song in a former piece he had produced — a song that every Allonby girl knew by heart. Beauty began to sing, trembling. Her voice had improved both in compass and depth, and the enforced rest since her work in Pantomime had saved the overstrain; but she was exhausted and frightened, and had had too little food of late to do herself justice. After a verse the Manager stopped and looked at her keenly.

"When did you last eat?" he said.

"I had some breakfast this morning."—

"Not enough for a healthy, growing girl evidently," he commented. "You look half starved. Look here, little girl"— he laid his strong hand on her arm and held her while he spoke —"you have behaved very foolishly, and I think you have had a lesson. But I don't like my girls to be unhappy or ill-treated, and I'm going to take you back. You will have to work hard, and I think your voice should

be properly trained. I thought so before, but you were too young; and I shall sign you on for three years so that there will be no chance for you to go to the Satyr or anywhere else."

"Oh, Mr. Allonby, I don't want to!" said poor Beauty, with a trembling underlip. "I shall be so glad to get back to Allonby's and to feel safe here!"

"There, there, poor child!" He rose from the piano, his heavy figure towering over Beauty's, and put his arm round her slight shoulders with a pressure that drew her against him. It seemed to her a promise of protection and salvation, and she almost nestled against him in her relief. "Papa" had always been a favourite with his girls, and though Beauty had never come much in contact with him before, she had a devout faith in his power and importance.

"Are you going to be a good girl now, and work hard?" he said, turning the fair little face up with his big hand. "You're not a child in experience, are you, Beauty?"

Then, with a bound, her heart seemed to leap into her throat, and she almost cried out. The monster that had pursued her in man all her short life was upon her again, where she least expected it. Her eyes fell swiftly before the Manager's, and she pulled herself together to resist shrinking. For she could not lose her chance — she dared not face the future with this last hope gone. Allonby spoke truly when he said he knew more about his girls than they guessed. Beauty's "experience" in Dublin had evidently reached his ears and placed her in a new light. She

was a girl who had been seduced, and so ripened into womanhood.

"I'm going to look after you for the future, and I can't have you starved. Here is something to go on with till you are getting your salary," he said, slipping an envelope into her hand. She felt the crisp note crackle inside. "You can work off the debt later on. Hughes will let you know about rehearsals. Now, are you feeling better?"

"Yes; thank you." She had almost added "sir," as to her master.

"Then we understand each other?"

For a minute she paused and looked backwards. In her mind she saw an alternative of anxiety and fear and sordid drudgery, with poverty always dodging her steps and success just out of her reach — a future with Michael Phayre, in which her prettiness faded and she got work only to lose it again; for she knew that Michael would oblige her to go straight, and never buy favour, by some quiet power of his own. The very comfort of Allonby's well-furnished room was a weight in the scale to turn her shivering fancy from the ugliness and privations that she hated with all her half-grown soul. She knew what Allonby's interest meant; but it included a sure and steady rise in her profession, the very thing, ironically enough, that Dr. Hardinge had urged on her. Her hesitation was so momentary that the man hardly felt it. He drew her closer to him again and kissed her soft, flawless face, and even while he did so Beauty was remembering how she had told Phayre that she loathed middle-aged men even to touch her.

But then she loathed insufficient food and sordid surroundings still more.

Michael Phayre did not come to see her that evening. He had gone on an excursion into the suburbs on his own account, with a weary sense of duty that overcame his rebelling senses. When he got back to his bare, clean room that was half studio and half bedroom and all garret, he found a note from Beauty brimming with the excitement of good news at last. The note was fairly well written and perfectly spelled, for her old training stood her in so much account, but there was a quality in it that made Michael ponder nevertheless. He had the fine ear of the artist, and some note rang false. When he went round to see her the next day he found her looking better and brighter than for many weeks, but her eyes looked out of the window, or at the soft shades of the "drapery" he had lent her to cover the table, rather than at him.

"Where were you yesterday?" she burst out almost before greeting him. "I was dying to talk to somebody. Isn't it good luck that I went to Allonby's quite on the chance? Mr. Allonby is taking me on again. I am to rehearse next week for chorus, and then he is going to see if he can't give me something better. I had a letter from him this morning."

"That's good, Beauty!" said Michael kindly, but his eyes followed her restless movements with the loving anxiety of a dog. "I hope they won't make you rehearse for long — it means a lot of work and no pay!"

"Oh, but I am in funds; Allonby made me an advance yesterday. Five pounds —" She stopped

suddenly and moved one of the Beasts on the mantelshelf with nervous fingers. "I changed it at the post office this morning; you must come to supper, and we'll have an orgy!" But through her high, excited laugh he still heard that false pitch of uneasiness.

"That was good of Mr. Allonby," said Michael quietly. "But you'll have to work it off later, Beauty, and that means no money coming in again. We'll wait for the orgy, and not spend it beforehand."

"Oh, but he meant me to spend it! He'll pay all right—" Then she caught herself up. "Allonby's is always good to its people. I know Mr. Allonby gave me the money to run me until he could get me into the theatre again."

"Is that usual, Beauty?"

Michael walked deliberately across the room and stood beside her, looking down on the bright head and the face turned from his own. He did not wait for her answer, but went on speaking deliberately without allowing himself time to think:

"Beauty, don't take that money unless you mean to pay it back legitimately. If it's an advance you mustn't draw any salary until it is wiped off. We'll face it together somehow; will you? I'm glad you've got work — I'm honestly glad; but — let me stand between you and anything more."

He waited, and in the long pause that followed it seemed to him that many things — hopes and beliefs and ideals — sank down out of reach. This playing a waiting game was a horrible thing. For he had not asked anything definite of her — she had not confessed anything definite of Edgar Allonby; yet both

knew what the other meant. It was for the girl to make the next move.

"I wish you wouldn't throw cold water on it, anyhow," said Beauty crossly, seeming to collect herself with a wrench. "Of course I'll pay off fair and square. Mr. Allonby is going to have my voice trained and means to push me — I can't quarrel with him. I was just beginning to feel alive again, and then you come with a long face and want me to go on pinching and scraping and living as if nothing was altered!"

Her voice gathered decision as she went on. It was quite obvious that she had made up her mind, and without any more actual putting into words she had chosen her path. He looked round the forlorn room which all their efforts had hardly mitigated, and then he looked at the slight young figure and the rich fairness of her face, and he did not wonder. Beauty's soul was still too ungrown to lift her clear of her surroundings. She hated ugliness by instinct, and she shrank from physical pain. It was a weighing of the scales between her flinching from another elderly man who stretched greedy hands to her youth, and her flinching from the flints of virtue, and her recent experiences had turned the scale. Michael saw that all his intended sacrifice had been in vain, and that if he asked her outright to marry him now she would find an excuse for herself. The struggle of last night fell flat — it was almost ludicrous.

"I am sorry I was a wet blanket," he said in the same quiet manner. "To turn to another subject: I went down to Wandlebridge to-day and made some inquiries for you."

Her face flushed half angrily, and she turned to him so taken aback that her little red mouth remained open.

"Mrs. Darling is dead," said Michael, answering her unasked question. "She seems to have died very shortly after you left her, which accounts for no inquiries having been made about you. Her sister took possession of everything, and the cottage has been in the possession of other people for years. That was all I could find out."

"Thank you!" said Beauty in a low voice. He had not softened the news to her, for she had never confessed to any feeling for her foster-mother, nor had her behaviour shown much consideration for the only home she had known. She meant to go back some day — that was all. Even now, when she learned that the one link with her past was severed, she was not really upset. She did not want to cry about Mrs. Darling, though she felt she ought, and her suddenly subdued manner was much more due to Michael than to the news of the death. There was something that was new to her, almost stern, in his face and voice as he said good-bye, and the words echoed in her ears with a finality that startled her and made her long to call him back. She was a little frightened, and it seemed as if she would close the door on one period of her life and its possibilities when Michael Phayre closed the actual door of the room and left her. She wondered why this seemed so much more a line of demarcation to her than any former incident, though they had been so much more tragic, not realizing that hitherto Fate had had something to do with deciding her course, and had lifted

responsibility from her shoulders. Now she was deliberately acting for herself.

"I shall have to write and tell Dr. Hardinge," said Michael Phayre to himself, even while he crossed the room. "I hope he won't think I have failed in my trust. I should like to meet him once, actually in the flesh"— for they had only known each other by letters and through the mutual interest of Beauty Darling. At the door he looked back, and then came slowly towards her again with outstretched hands.

"I shall always be ready to be your friend, Beauty," he said simply. "I always am your friend — whatever you do."

She did not take his hands, but with one quick glance at him she flung herself down in the shabby arm-chair and buried her face. She was not crying, for Beauty's crying was always audible, but he saw that the red blood had risen to the roots of her hair, and he mercifully turned away and left her to her realization of what she had done already in intention.

Looked at in one light it was lamentable. But on the other side — for there *was* another side — it might be said that the angels had fought for the soul of Michael Phayre and had saved him, though through the medium of another. He had tried to rescue Beauty Darling; but it had been she who had rescued him.

CHAPTER IX

BEAUTY DARLING sat before the table in her dressing-room, making up. The threefold glass, carefully arranged to reflect her in full face and profile under a strong light, presented a mere copy of the round-faced girl whom Trevor Guy had seen in the apple-tree, but its characteristics were essentially the same, for Beauty had kept her good gift of typical Youth — dewy red lips, downy skin, and unclouded blue eyes, with that ennobling note of tragedy in the line of the brows. The shape of the face, too, lent itself to an impression of childish roundness, the low line of jaw and short chin defying added years to lengthen it much. Beauty was nineteen — nearly twenty — but as she pushed the sunny curls away from her temples to rub on the grease-paint, she looked hardly more than sixteen.

The last two or three years had been momentous ones for her career, and had been very busy. She had had to train hard in the production of her voice whether she would or no, for her master was in earnest and would take no pupils who did not work. Beauty, with her love of ease, would no doubt have shirked the training if she could, and have trusted to an indulgent public and her own attractions to carry her on triumphantly in the competition of stage favourites; she owed it to other agencies than her own throughout her life that her work was thorough,

and that the best that could be was made out of plastic material. The singing lessons had improved her pronunciation too, though in moments of excitement she still echoed the twang of the theatre girls — an indelible mark that once gained is never lost. Edgar Allonby had seen that she lived healthily and well, without undue excitement (he discouraged supper-parties and later hours than the theatre entailed), and that she had regular meals, his experience of girls leading him to think that their chosen diet was French pastry and an ice-cream-soda at odd moments.

Beauty's physique had developed on its natural lines, and she did not suffer much from anæmia or fatigue in consequence. She was still a small woman, slenderly built, with small hands and feet, but her figure was soft and round and rather inclined to be full (the more admired from the stalls), falling to an ideal waist that suggested the half-humorous lines:

"What an arm! — and what a waist
For an arm!"

There had been no scandal — not much, at least. Beauty lived alone, that was all, in quite respectable rooms on the South side, near Chelsea. She no longer chummed with other girls, which would have been conclusively in her favour, but her advancement at Allonby's was explainable by the acknowledged fact that Allonby was always generous to talent, and was on the look-out for a star. Beauty had not been rushed to the front; she was only playing second lead now, but she had her dressing-room to herself, and her Dresser lived in the same house with her and was practically her maid. Janet was a shrewd young

woman, who knew that if she talked she would lose both her private service with Beauty and her engagement at the theatre.

According to Michael Phayre's theory Beauty Darling ought to have returned thanks every time she looked into a glass for gifts which she had done little to deserve; but there was nothing but a very common-sensical knit between her brows as she turned the mirrors this way and that to get every point of light upon her face and expose it to an ordeal as severe as the footlights. The make-up was not coming rightly, and Beauty was upset.

"Give me my two-and-a-half, for God's sake, Janet!" she said. "My face is a filthy failure tonight."

"It looks all right from here," said the Dresser, handing the flesh-coloured stick of paint over Beauty's shoulder. The girl did not answer, but went on adding to the crust on her fair skin, while Janet answered a knock on the door and returned to the dressing-table laden with a great bunch of lilies, breathing wistful perfume in the heat and glare of the dressing-room.

"Letters, miss — and these flowers!" she said admiringly.

"Oh!" said Beauty half indifferently, turning her head to sniff. "Who sent them? Give me the letters!"

"'Mr. Chorley,'" read Janet from the card. "'With sincere admiration for the loveliest of Savages'!"

Beauty's great hit in the piece of the moment was

when she appeared on a desert island in a fringe of seaweed and grasses with a miniature tomahawk in her hand, and sang a song about her cannibal lover and his fascinations, supported by a chorus of girls in beads and deerskins. She was busy over her letters, but she turned her head half scornfully to look at the innocent flowers and the card of the man who was reported in the daily papers as the most brainy politician on the Government benches.

"I hate Members of Parliament," said Beauty, with a shrug of her bare shoulders, from which the towel had slipped. "They are all old before they are talked about, and they are not worth knowing until they are!"

"How about Lord Derringham?" said Janet, with raised eyebrows.

"Yes, but he's a peer — he'd be worth going to supper with, anyhow," said Beauty carelessly. "Do hurry up, Janet! I'm half naked, and the orchestra's on."

Janet produced and shook out the delicate dress of imitation grasses with its brief skirt, and hooked Beauty into it. The girl's legs were encased in fleshings as close as a second skin, and hardly discernible from it, and her neck and arms were so bare that it wanted very little imagination to slip her bust also out of the flimsy bodice. All of Beauty that the Censor allowed to the public was certainly shown. Janet fastened a great shell like a cap amongst the loose curls of her golden-brown hair, and slyly pulled out some of the lilies from Mr. Chorley's bouquet and offered them to her young lady.

"They don't grow on desert islands!" said Beauty disdainfully. "Am I ready, Janet? Dust that powder off my shoulder!"

There came a sharp rap on the door. "Miss Darling, please!" said the call-boy crisply. Beauty opened the door and ran down the echoing stone stairs.

Left alone, Janet of course read the letters that Beauty had left open on the table, some out of their envelopes. There was the usual selection — two invitations to dances (one given by the Sovereignty girls and one by a well-known milliner in Bond Street), a good deal of flattery and fervour, several offers of supper-parties and luncheons, and one business-like request for an acquaintance between the writer and Miss Darling. Even this suggested a table as the medium of introduction. Why is it that when woman attracts us our first fond desire is to feed her? I have never been able to explain this satisfactorily from a man's point of view, except under the beautiful theory that we wish to do unto others as we should like them to do unto us.

Janet was not particularly interested in Beauty's love-letters. She read them partly because she was idle and partly because all knowledge is liable to come in useful. She was by no means a spy of Allonby's, but she was in his service as much as Beauty's, because he paid her wages. Janet knew all there was to know, and considerably more. Beauty never went away for week-ends unless there was a whole party; and if her Manager came down to see her at Chelsea, it was quite permissible. The affair had, in fact, rather fallen into a habit, and lacked all feverish

urgency. If Beauty had shuddered at one time, she had schooled herself into passive acquiescence long since, and took her obligations prosaically. There are many wives who cannot say more, or less.

What really interested Janet amongst the letters was one from Folly Bird, a Satyr girl whose acquaintance Beauty had made when she was first at Allonby's. They had not then been intimate, but with the hothouse growth of stage friendships their relations had ripened violently since Beauty came more to the front. The letter had been opened in a hurry and not thoroughly digested by Beauty, or — to do her justice — she would never have left it about to fall into other hands than her own. At the bottom of the first page was the sentence, "I am afraid I shall have to leave the Satyr for a time, for "— and Beauty had had no time to read further, but had run to catch her cue, simply speculating as to whether the other Musical Comedy houses had offered Folly a leg up. There was small chance of her getting into Allonby's, for her voice was third rate, and she depended on a really beautiful figure for her position at the Satyr. Folly could always "fill three or four stalls," as the saying went, by a personal display, and though her acting was a negligible quantity, she had risen to small parts — winked herself there, perhaps. Anyhow, Beauty had no fears for her. But Janet had turned the page and read the next words —"I am in for it this time, and there's no hope of an accident. I've got caught, after all these years, and just for a little harmless fling that you would think *couldn't* end in a slip! It's all up with me if I lose my figure, so I'm going to look after myself, and no mistake.

I'm going to see an old friend of ours — a doctor (an A1 man in Manchester Square) — and ask him to take charge. I wish you'd come with me and help me over the ordeal. You'd be a *real* Darling if you would. I'm just dreading it.

"All the best.— From your old pal, FOLLY."

Most of the words were underlined or dashed, for Folly emphasized like all her world. Janet read greedily, for she was a born newsmonger, and all her little gaslit world knew Folly Bird of the Satyr. She wished she knew who the man was, but Folly had had that much discretion and there was no hint, and scandal had coupled her name with so many men that the father of her child might have been a syndicate to the Dresser's lack of charity. She had read Folly's letter last, and had only time to thrust it back into its envelope and turn to her work of setting to rights before Beauty came flying back to the dressing-room, still singing a stave of her successful song in her fresh young voice:

"I'm half afraid of Hannibal—
My own sweet Cannibal!
He swears he'll eat me up some day with kisses — kisses — kisses!"

"Now, Janet, hurry!" she said impatiently, sweeping aside a heap of white silk and flinging herself down in its place to tear off her stage moccasins. "That ball scene dress is such a beast to get into. — Damn! There's another knock at the door. Tell them to go to hell, there's a good girl!"

"It's Mr. Allonby, miss!"

"Oh!" said Beauty, snatching up the silk wrapper which had fallen on the floor and covering her warm white arms and bosom with instant decency. "Come in! Did you want to speak to me, Mr. Allonby?"

"Yes; can you spare me a moment now, or will you come to my room after the show?"

"I'm rather late — they're cutting the orchestra to-night, and the ball scene was half set as I came through at the back —"

"I'll go down and see if I can get some more hot water, miss!" Janet broke in discreetly. "It won't take a minute to hook you up."

As the door closed behind her Allonby sat down heavily in the chair before the looking-glass and smiled. The threefold mirrors showed his sallow, hairless face, and the thick rolls of flesh under the jaw, into which his collar cut with merciless distinctness. "Janet's a good girl," he said. "I wanted to see you alone, Beauty, and I can't get down to Chelsea to-morrow."

"What is it, Eddy?" She came and leant against his chair, because from that position she could not see his image in the glass, and it somehow offended her. She stretched her arm across his shoulders, and it seemed an endless width to that slim reach, the delicate inside curve of the elbow-joint looking almost transparent against the solid black cloth. Fortunately she had not yet whitened her arms for the ball scene.

"It's about Urgmont's offer, dear. He wants a girl to play a small character part in his new piece, and he suggested you. I don't know that I won't send you there just to try it."

"Eddy! At the Phœnix!" For this was legiti-

mate Comedy, and a well-known House, and Beauty had never aspired above Musical Comedy.

"Yes; it would give you another chance — see what you're made of!" He pinched the small ear beneath Beauty's curls. "You would play 'by kind permission,' of course; but if you did well I don't know that I wouldn't put some money into a new Comedy venture. I don't mean you to get out of my hands — you needn't be afraid of that." He laughed again, but Beauty could do nothing but stare at him and gasp. "Come to my room and discuss it later," he said.

"Oh, Eddy! I'm afraid I can't. I was going out to supper to-night —"

He turned shortly at the door, as he was about to leave her. "Who is it?" he said in a different tone. "You've been out before this week —"

"No, that I haven't!" She was a trifle indignant. "Most of the others have, but not me. It's only Bartig and Lawless and Cuthy Noble, and two other girls besides myself."

"Well!" He still seemed a little upset, and his eyes fell on the flowers. "I suppose one of these young fools sent them?"

"No — Mr. Chorley. I met him at Mona Morley's last week — he's a fool!" said Beauty calmly of England's most polished speaker.

"He'll be a Cabinet Minister before long, anyhow," said Allonby, laughing again. "Don't snub him — he might be useful to you some day. Always keep *powerful* friends, Beauty. I'm sorry you're going out with these brainless asses, but I suppose it can't be helped now."

"I don't often go, and I've been asked so many times. If I'd known you wanted me about this job —"

"It's all right, child. I'll come down and have a long talk with you on Friday. Don't sit up till daylight, and go home with the girls, that's all. If you must go to supper-parties, you would be wiser to go with a man like Chorley. He's an advertisement in himself."

"He's so dull"— she had nearly added "and old," but stopped herself in time. Youth did seem very desirable from the prick of the red blood in her own veins, and she felt sometimes that she must have her fling like the others, and throw prudence aside. Beauty did not underestimate the advantages to be gained from keeping to elderly men, for in her experience they mostly meant the obvious good things in which her soul revelled, and in which she indulged to satiety since Allonby allowed her to do so. There was too much scent in the dressing-room, too many toilet aids, too great an array of *peignoirs* and slippers and jewellery sent her by admirers in ambush for her favour. But the Musical Comedy Star has established a right for herself to accept jewellery and give nothing in return, unless the giver is shrewd enough to drive a hard bargain first. In those circumstances Beauty reluctantly abandoned the pretty things offered her; otherwise she took them as her due, though noting again that they generally came from the middle-aged.

Nevertheless she wanted sometimes to be young and irresponsible with Youth and Irresponsibility, to be boisterously merry and noisy, and to behave according to her upbringing. It was a relief to-night to get

away from a serious talk over her career with Allonby, and to go to the supper-party at the Savoy, where the three young men and two other girls awaited her — Barbara Sinclair (long since Mrs. Jack Simpson and a *divorcée*) and Cherry Bough, friends of her younger days, and Lord Robert Bartig, the Hon. Ivor Lawless, and Captain Noble of the Life Guards. Nobody was over thirty, and the night was a merry one. When Beauty reached the hotel she found that her party had already assembled in the lounge, for the other girls got off earlier than she could do, and Captain Noble had come out to the glass doors to await her. He was the eldest of the party, being quite twenty-nine and qualified to keep order. Moreover, he was host, and Beauty Darling sat at his left hand in the place of honour, though Mrs. Simpson was the chaperon.

"Am I late?" she called gaily, as she put her hand on his arm and jumped out of the cab. "I suppose every one is cursing me, but the show is so long. Mr. Allonby ought to cut that second act — I've told him so."

Captain Noble looked down into the wonderful little face, lifted fearlessly to the electric lamps, and his languid manner quickened a little. There was not a trace of grease-paint on Beauty's soft skin, but the lashes shading her deep eyes were still a little blackened, and the carelessness somehow added piquancy to a loveliness that had no trace of tire, though it was nearly midnight and she had had a long night of hard work.

"You are not very late," he said. "And even if

you had been we should have been content to wait."

"You better speak for yourself," said Beauty, with the high laugh of racing spirits. "I expect the girls are famished." She entered the grand hall with him, and shook hands with the rest of the group, Lord Robert Bartig immediately beginning to chaff her about hoping to enhance her value by keeping them all waiting.

"Come on, and don't rag — I want my food!" said Cherry Bough, putting her hand on his shoulder and pushing him familiarly in the direction of the supper-room. The others followed, Noble drawing Beauty's hand through his arm to lead her to the table reserved for them. There was a little conscious sense of their entrance as they came in — heads turned to watch them pass, an obvious question from some one who was not a habitué of the supper-room — that was as pleasant to Beauty as the roar of applause at the end of her songs. She leaned her elbows on the table and her chin in her hands for a moment, looking round her with her pencilled eyes, and perhaps it was to her as typical a success as any other in her career, though it seemed so much less important. But to be young and beautiful and looked at, even by the passing world, was life at its best to Beauty Darling. Even the homage of Cuthbert Noble's obvious infatuation could only add a little to the fundamental pleasure.

"Pretty full, isn't it?" said Beauty, turning to Lord Robert on her left, already deep in the mysteries of hot lobster and fresh toast; it is a great thing to be twenty-three. Their own table was near the windows, but the body of the room was scattered with guests,

the half world and the whole world mingling indifferently. "Who's that having supper with old Everton Toffee?"

"That's my sister-in-law, Lady Maidenbridge," he replied with a cheerful grin. "She's making the running with old Toffee — but she's deuced proper nowadays."

"Wasn't she on the stage?" asked Cherry, filling her mouth with light pastry and cunningly prepared champignons — Noble had ordered a special supper.

"Why, you silly, she was Connie Taylor of Allonby's years ago, when I was in the children's play at the Sovereignty!" said Mrs. Simpson. "I bet Connie knows a thing or two still, Bobbie!"

"Not she!" said the boy solemnly. "She's the most innocent thing on earth — she knows nothing! There never was such a respectable woman as my sister-in-law. Maidenbridge calls her Constance, and she never goes about without him in tow. He's there now, with his back to us, by the pillar."

"Go over and ask them to join our party — do!"

"Not for Joe! She don't know I'm within a hundred miles of her for all the notice she'll take — you bet!"

"That's what comes of marrying one of us — we always reform our hubbies," said Mrs. Simpson cynically. "Go to the stage if you want a straight-living wife. It was just because Jack couldn't stick it that we parted."

Lady Maidenbridge was indeed ignoring her brother-in-law and his friends with an unconsciousness that did credit to her histrionic talents. Lord Maidenbridge, a young man with a weak mouth and eye-

glasses, was really oblivious of their presence, but old General Toff's wicked brown eyes were alive in their network of wrinkles, and were scrutinizing the girls as he might have done blood-stock at Doncaster. He knew the points of a horse or a woman, and made Mrs. Simpson laugh as she returned his glances.

"The old sinner!" she said. "He used to have a box for the season when Edna Carruthers was on, years ago" (it was only six); "and one night she had a new song about the schoolboys and the sweet-shops — that was in 'The London Girl,' you remember, Cherry? — and at the end of the first verse she looked up at him and sang:

"'As sweet — as sweet — as sweet as Everton Toffy!'

The house simply roared."

"Improper old Johnnie! Lady Maidenbridge is too particular for him — he'd like to come over here," said Ivor Lawless. The point of his remark was greeted with renewed laughter and no objection, and Cherry Bough made eyes across her champagne-glass at old Sir Everton, held in solemn bondage beside Lady Maidenbridge, whose acquired propriety he found very dull.

Beauty Darling had not taken much part in the conversation beyond an occasional sentence. She was in a state of dreamy content, and her eyes smiled while her lips were too busy with her supper to do so. The food and the wine had refreshed her sufficiently to make her feel happy in her tire (it had been a Matinée day), and she liked to know that every man in the room was looking at her, covertly or openly. She was getting well known at the Savoy, and had her

favourite table and her pet items on the carte. Moreover, she was enjoying her pleasures with the perfect appetite of youth — the lights and the luxury and the sense of admiration that followed her as she moved. Noble had slipped his hand over hers under the table once or twice and held it strongly. She liked that, too, and the warm youth and strength in his clasp.

"I wonder where old Toffee expects to hop off to when he dies?" Lawless was saying reprovingly. "He ought to be thinking of his latter end and not returning Miss Bough's glances."

"That's all rot nowadays," said Lord Robert, with the wisdom of his twenty-three years lived out since the eighties. "Even an old Johnnie like Toff has come to the conclusion that hell's a bogy."

"Tch! tch! There are ladies present! Of course there is no such place for them. What do you think, Miss Darling? You're very quiet."

A half-conscious memory was awakened in Beauty's mind from the connexion of the words. "I think it would be a pity to do away with hell altogether," she said. "Men need such a lot of damnation held over them to keep them straight!"

There was such an uproar of laughter that two or three men turned round stealthily from other tables and longed for the joke. Beauty joined the hilarity herself, and met the amused admiration in Noble's dark eyes without a pin-prick of conscience. It was not the first time she had quoted her foster-mother and taken the credit of a grim wisdom. Her brain was really of the reproductive order.

"That reminds me of old Nolly the other night,"

said Mrs Simpson. "He was slanging everybody for some muddle with the limes, and he told them all that if God made them he'd like to return them as low-class work that was only fit for the devil's service. Giddy Goat nearly rolled over in the wings, he was so fetched."

"Is Giddy goin' on with you? I heard he'd started a show of his own," said Lord Robert.

"Next autumn or winter — his contract with Nolly is up then," said Cherry Bough. "I'm going with him, if he'll give me terms."

"Are you?" Mrs. Simpson seemed surprised. "I wouldn't trust his Management for a good run. When he's settled, in a year or so, will be time enough for me to make a change."

The talk became generally theatrical, for two leading reasons — those who are on the Stage can talk of nothing but the Stage for very long, so the girls naturally drifted off to their own subject; while the men were young enough to feel a secret triumph in their familiarity with the world behind the scenes, and talked with even more fluency than their companions of Flossie Farmer fluffing in her scene with Lloyd Warrender, and how Lord Theodore de Valence was financing the new venture at the Phœnix, and Dotty Sharpe was going to marry Rochester and leave the boards — for the present. It was Beauty who threw a bombshell into the conversation by a remark about her own future that struck everybody dumb.

"Well, as far as I know I'm done with Allonby's for a while after 'The Nobodies' is taken off. I'm going to try Comedy for a bit."

The three men stared at her to see if it were a joke, but the beautiful little face was perfectly grave — not a dimple lingering to betray a hoax.

"Beau-ty!" said Cherry Bough at last. "Are you really? What's Allonby going to say to that?"

"Oh, I'm signed on to him, of course; I can't go without his permission, but he'll let me all right. I expect to be at the Phœnix next year."

There was another silence. The girls wondered what had spurred Beauty on to this ambition, and shrewdly suspected that Edgar Allonby was not going to do anything more for her, and that she was taking a high flight on her own account. They did not think it could be successful, and were inclined to be sorry for her. That Allonby was really the instigator of such a change they did not guess, for Beauty had been cautious at least in only mentioning him as probably willing — if she had not been drinking champagne she would never have mentioned the subject at all. The men, on their side, felt an equal incredulity, partly because they had grown accustomed to think of Beauty's claim to success on the Stage as resting solely on her face and voice. Certainly she had never shown more histrionic talent than the singing of catchy tunes with her eyes upturned to the gallery. One man at least thought of her accent, and felt half pitiful, half contemptuous. It was not very much — not aggressively Cockney — but it was there, and it did not lend itself to legitimate Comedy. Beauty Darling off the Musical Comedy stage seemed an anachronism.

"I didn't know you were so ambitious, Miss Darling," said Noble with a smile at last. "But I'm sure

we all wish you success. Come! Let's drink to Miss Darling as the future Lady Teazle!"

Beauty did not for the moment remember that character, though her school training had taught her to read Sheridan amongst other classics. She was quick enough not to give it away. "Oh, I have my ambitions!" she said as she raised her own glass. "I have two friends who are always preaching a career to me and don't let me forget it."

This was true, for Dr. Hardinge still wrote to the waif he had rescued, and though she seldom saw Michael Phayre, he was, as he had told her, still her friend. The years had done something for Michael too, though so slowly that he hardly realized when the change had come about. It was not much, hardly an acknowledgment of conscientious work, performed under drawbacks of environment and insufficient nourishment; still, a few people were beginning to recognize a drawing as "a Phayre" and to pick out his few pictures on exhibition at art galleries. Michael was still a personality in the background of Beauty's mind, though she hardly knew it, and was much more taken up with the passing faces in the foreground of her life — Cuthbert Noble's at the present moment. There was a certain attraction about Captain Noble in that he had been half engaged, or on the verge of an engagement, to a girl in his own world, so rumour said, but had followed the lure of two dark-blue eyes across the footlights and forgotten her. Beauty felt a little pleasurable excitement in his society, and he flattered her vanity — above all he was *young,* and the grip of his hand or a more ardent glance from his eyes thrilled her with a pleasure very different to her

relations with Allonby. She knew quite well that he was infatuated, though whether it would lead him as far as marriage she had no grounds to say. He was well born and in an expensive regiment, without a large income to make marriage with one of Allonby's girls a very possible thing. Still, she liked him, and his passion for her was keen and unsatisfied. If Beauty had been Cherry Bough or Barbara Sinclair there would have been far more chance of it ending in matrimony.

Later that night, or rather morning, he drove her home to Chelsea in the little motor-brougham which would only hold two, and which, therefore, obviously made it impossible for her to "go home with the other girls" as Allonby had told her to do. And because Beauty's head was tired it fell very naturally upon his shoulder, and she lay in his arms, half asleep, half pleasantly conscious of his virile manhood and his whispered love-making. The safe darkness of the brougham and the wine he had drunk were not the safest conditions for either of them — but as the carriage slowed down to a soft whir and stopped at the respectable door, he caught a glimpse of her face in the first streak of dawn, and it was like a tired child's. He had taken the latch-key from her, and had had some mad purpose of going into the house, when he saw that she was half asleep already. He took the little soft figure up in his arms for a moment and held her crushed against his heart with his hot face buried in her scented hair — but her face was the face of a tired child, and something better in him made the suggestion on his lips die away unuttered.

The embrace had waked Beauty. She yawned

sleepily when he lifted her out on to the pavement, and running up to the door, she let herself in with a backward nod for good night. She was too tired to ask him to come in and have a cigarette, she decided, but she wondered a little why he had not taken the trouble to accompany her as far as the door! —

CHAPTER X

"ANOTHER telegram for Miss Vansagnew, please."

"Is it for me, or for my sister, Tommy? You brought me one of hers last time!"

"Miss Mildred Vansagnew!" insisted the call-boy, thrusting the envelope through the half-opened door into the Dresser's hand.

Mildrew Vansagnew opened and read it hurriedly, and then stuck it up over the glass with several others that she had already received. The dressing-rooms at the Phœnix were narrow and old-fashioned, and only two ladies were dressing in this besides Mildred, but over each glass was the same array of congratulatory telegrams, or wishing "good luck" from absent friends for the first night of the new Comedy. They were flanked by humorous pincushions in the shape of dolls, or toys, or fancy mascots of all kinds, for actresses are very much alike in this, be they Musical Comedy or Legitimate Drama.

"That makes the round dozen to me. How many have you, Mrs. Germaine?"

"Sixteen!"

"Ah! you always beat us all! And you, Miss Darling?"

"The same as you — twelve."

Beauty Darling was dressing at the end of the long

table that ran all down one side of the room, and over her triple looking-glass were ranged the pallid slips of paper, looking as anæmic as only telegrams can. Beneath them were a selection of her Beasts, for she had too many to bring to her restricted quarters at the Phœnix; but there was something forlorn in the appearance of Cuddle-Puddles, the sky-blue cat with the long neck, and Doggie-Babs, the apricot dog, who had pure colic to judge from his expression. Their only companions were the bird that screwed his head in all directions and a donkey sitting on his haunches with his forelegs resting on his thighs. Beauty felt forlorn, too, though she would not own to it. It seemed so strange to be in a dressing-room with only two other people, and those two in a superior position to herself. She had known what it was to be amongst ten or twenty girls of her own age, giggling, shouting, playing the fool, and even swearing at each other; and she had known what it was to have her dressing-room to herself and to be a coming "star" in Musical Comedy at any rate. But here — here she was nobody! Or rather she was Beauty Darling of Allonby's, raised into the ranks of real Comedy, and undeniably going up in her profession as she retrogressed in individual importance. Beauty did not like being nobody; she longed even for the dear noisy days when the Lilliput Troupe kept No. 6 dressing-room lively. At any rate she had been one of them, and a good deal prettier than any! Here, in the Phœnix, she was an outsider, and prettiness did not count so much as acting. Art was the thing to aim at, and Beauty became bewildered with the new standard where nobody cared at all whether half a dozen men would

come night after night to look at you, but if you had "carried the House" even for a few minutes, you were a person to be respected — an Actress in earnest over her Profession!

It all seemed very strange. Beauty knew what it was to give "a rotten show," and to "get the bird" from the gallery, if a girl were not word-perfect and could not look a picture in the limes or make the points of her songs; but the importance given to entrances and exits, to getting over the footlights and to "tones" was beyond her comprehension. Grand finales were timed, and people had their places in Musical Comedy, and woe betide them if they threw anybody out when Syddie Hughes was bucketing his Company! — but the rehearsals at the Phœnix were like a difficult game of chess, where one person's steps were counted to allow another time to turn in profile to the audience, and the next tense sentence to be given on the nail with the utmost effect of words and movement. Even the Stage-Manager recognized a desire to work equal to his own, and forbore to be very rude.

"They make a damned fuss over nothing!" she told Folly Bird in confidence, for Folly being out of it for the present was a fit recipient of private grievances. Nemesis had overtaken Folly Bird, and she was reported as "resting"! The birth of her child had robbed the mother even of the poor virtue of working for it, and she would have been in bitter plight if Beauty Darling had not been drawing a good salary and come to her assistance. For Beauty with the true theatrical charity was working for two, and came and detailed her experiences to Folly. "Mr. Pope was nearly blind with a cold at rehearsal!" she said,

"and instead of having a hot gin and gagging his part, he went about looking like a teapot in a fit and apologizing to the S. M. I'm fed up with politeness nowadays!"

It even seemed odd to Beauty that no one knew about her Beasts, and that Mrs. Germaine said, "What a lot of funny china figures you have, Miss Darling! I never saw such cats and dogs. Do look, Mildred, they are absolute nightmares!"— for Mrs. Germaine and Mildred Vansagnew were on terms of an old intimacy, and Mrs. Germaine called the girl by her Christian name; but Mildred did not call her "Germy" in return, as would inevitably have happened at the Satyr or Allonby's, and they both treated Miss Darling with a quiet courtesy that somehow held her at arm's distance beyond the familiarity of Christian names or nicknames. The men were not so aloof, it is true. After a few rehearsals Beauty found that her face did its usual work. There was always somebody ready to talk to her in the wings; and once when she had met the lead, Arthur Curtiss, on the stairs, he had stopped to joke with her for a few minutes, and before she could get away she had found his arm around her waist and he had kissed her. Men are very much alike whatever their circumstances, Beauty thought. But these were London men and members of the Green Room Club, and the atmosphere about them was alien, even though the old Adam occasionally peered through. Furthermore, Beauty resented the fact, which she was quick enough to guess, that they would not have tried to kiss Mildred Vansagnew on the stairs, let alone her more famous sister, Daphne, who was so much the leading lady that she was hedged in by the glamour

of her position and had hardly come in contact with Beauty Darling except in the scenes where they played together.

Beauty's part in the new piece was a small one, but effective. She was a ragged girl who sang at the kerb in a well-known London street, and was instrumental in unravelling the complications of the plot. It was a little character part, and was likely to make a hit if properly handled. Beauty had not been nervous at rehearsal; her voice was good, and she had no difficulty in exaggerating, though she might have done of eradicating, her accent. She was not in the least aware that her pronunciation was not as pure as Miss Vansagnew's, however, and accepted the producer's approval of her Cockney twang as a tribute to her cleverness in imitating the girls she had heard in the streets at Peckham. What she did not like was the discovery that her make-up must be a very different thing to what it had been at Allonby's.

She had played a flower-seller in Musical Comedy — a flower-seller with a pink and white face and little bare white feet below the picturesque rags, and a bare head to show her sunny curls. But at the Phœnix they wanted reality, not pretty make-believe. Beauty appeared at the dress-rehearsal with her curls loose about her small fair face, and despite the hideous smashed hat she wore under protest she was still the Allonby girl incongruously introduced into Legitimate Drama. Then the Stage-Manager swore softly, and the Producer told her curtly and at once that she was not looking the part. Beauty pouted and argued, and finally lost her temper, saying things on the stairs to the dressing-room that could be heard on the stage,

and were quite suited to the Satyr, but unknown to the Phœnix. She knew what she had done five minutes later, and cried stormily, furious with herself for putting herself at such a disadvantage, and furious with the Management for having been the cause of it. But it was all no good to her. The Stage-Manager took her in hand, and insisted on the curls being screwed into a tight wad at the nape of her neck, and the pink and white face being altered to one that suggested hunger and misery. Even then the girl was pretty, triumphantly pretty, despite false lines and pallid colouring. The lovely mould of brow and jaw, and the delicate features, would have saved the face something of beauty even though it had been marked with smallpox, to say nothing of her sweet blue eyes. But she could not see it, and only knew that she had been made ill-looking and unattractive, and was shorn of the glory of her usual attributes. The Stage, to Beauty, meant a place where a complexion was touched up to the ideal of a doll, and hair was spread out to its utmost advantage, and eyes were blackened to increase their size. She knew no more of art than a little pig.

The absence of her usual weapons of attraction made her frightened, and as she stood before the glass on this first night of the piece, she was losing her confidence. The ragged dirty figure and pinched face did not seem to belong to her, and she could not imagine laying siege to public favour and winning it in such a guise. Something of what was in her mind seemed to reach Mildred Vansagnew in an occult fashion, for she turned from her own glass to speak her congratulations with intuitive kindness.

"Oh, Miss Darling! What a wonderful make-up!

Do look, Mrs. Germaine; isn't it exactly right for 'Peggy!' Mr. Thelma (the author) *will* be pleased. He is awfully keen on that character."

"Yes, certainly," said Mrs. Germaine, turning to look also. She was an elderly woman who played elderly parts, and played them very well, and she had a certain dignity and carriage that extinguished all Beauty's acquired assurance. "That is *much* better than at the dress rehearsal!"

"Oh! but one never gets a make-up right at dress-rehearsal," said Mildred hastily, scenting danger. "I was far too red; Mr. Thelma had to tell me so, but I didn't grasp the fact that he meant me to be anæmic!" she added, laughing. "Can't you *feel* a part more when you're really like it, Miss Darling? I can! And you have a clean face in your second scene, you know," she added, with a quick understanding of Beauty's rebellious mind.

"I think it's a burlesque make-up," said Beauty sulkily. "But if Mr. Thelma likes that kind of thing, I suppose no one else counts."

Mildred sank into dismayed silence, with a brief glance at Mrs. Germaine, who raised her brows. Could not the girl see that at dress-rehearsal she had been the simpering picture on a sweetmeat-box, and that now she was "Peggy"! Beauty could not see it, however, because she had never grasped the character of Peggy. She played it like a parrot, taking tones and movements from the Producer, and with a certain facility born of her years of training. She did not play it badly, because it came easily to her to imitate a lower-class girl — she had lived amongst them, and almost thought like them for most of her

life; but she could play that one part and no other in real Comedy, unless she developed unlooked-for talent during the run, as the Stage-Manager had already shrewdly decided. Her voice was her strongest bid for favour. Clear and pure and sound, it struck a hush through the House when she first opened her lips at the imitation kerbstone, despite the fact that it had an unusual tremolo. She was horribly nervous, but the tremor was, if anything, rather effective, and gave the impression of a girl faint with hunger instead of strong and in good voice. How she got through the rest of the part she did not know; she heard a voice speaking her lines with the required accent, and she supposed that she took and gave the right cues; but for the first time in her life she experienced real stage fright, and she felt like a half-delirious creature under physical torture. At one moment it seemed to her that she could not go back on the stage even when her entrance came, and the next that she had gone on almost too soon, and could never get off it again. She felt disgraced and humiliated, and was thankful that none of her friends were in front owing to their own performances. For she had meant it to be so different — she had fancied herself as making quite a hit in her small part, and being spoken of in the Press as finding her own sphere — too good an actress for mere Musical Comedy, etc. She had given herself airs a little for being in Legitimate Drama, and had been quite sure that she was equal to carrying the House with her. Was she not used to the round of applause that greeted her tripping on to the stage with a strong limelight to show how flawless the face and how much on view the figure! Ah, but then the

public saw her as she really was, only a little intensified and made the most of — bright curls, red lips, pink cheeks, and a goodly display of ankles. No wonder they rose at her and shouted her name —" Beauty! Beauty Darling!" Poor Beauty was inclined to put the whole blame of her failure on the ugly make-up that had made her " Peggy " and no longer Beauty Darling.

She did not know how she got off once her last line was said. She felt the Stage-Manager pat her shoulder and say, " Very good! — you mustn't be nervous — you'll get over that by to-morrow night." But she rushed away from him, upstairs to the empty dressing-room, and sobbed her heart out with her face buried in the long smart coat in which she came and went to and from the theatre, heedless of staining its delicate fawn colour. She was free early in the evening, for she had nothing to do in the last act, and Janet had gone out for refreshments, not expecting to be wanted just then. Beauty got rid of her make-up with shaking fingers, and shook down her hair round her white, tear-stained face. It was a warm night, and she had only a lace scarf to twist over her head, which she regretted, as she would have been glad of the shade of a hat-brim. But secure in the fact that no one was likely to be about, she opened the dressing-room door and made a bolt for it.

The stage-doorkeeper was arguing with a tall man in an overcoat, who was either trying to come in or to send a note, and it was strictly against the rules for anyone to be allowed " behind " on a first night. Beauty tried to brush past him, but the stage-door-

keeper said, "Why, there *is* Miss Darling, sir!" and before she had gone a yard she heard a step beside her, and then she was looking up into Michael Phayre's strained, tender eyes.

"Why, Beauty!" he said quietly, drawing her hand through his arm, "I came to see if I might walk part of the way home with you, or cab it, if you like, and that Cerberus of yours was nearly fetching the police to stop my persistence! I knew you were off early, and I wanted to tell you how much I enjoyed the play, and liked you in it. I wish you could see yourself! You don't know how pathetic you were. I wanted to pick you up and carry you off to the nearest cookshop and give you a meal, you poor little mite! A woman near me was crying over you — I nearly cried too!"

He was talking on in his kindly, merry voice that somehow carried comfort with it, giving her time to recover a little. Beauty had not seen Michael Phayre for many months, and then it had been only a chance encounter in the street; but he seemed suddenly the most dear and familiar figure in the world. She clasped her little hands round his arm, clinging to him, and spoke with a catch in her breath.

"How — how did you come to be in the theatre, Mr. Phayre?"

She had never called him Michael, and never would have done unless he had asked her to marry him, as she once knew that he meant to do. She had called Captain Noble "Cuthbert" — more often "Cuthy" — in the first six weeks of their acquaintance, and even a man as old as Allonby became "Eddy" with their

more intimate relations. But Michael Phayre was "Mr. Phayre" still, though they had shared poverty together, and he had risen up at her side now like an angel of pity.

"Why, I know Thelma — he's a capital fellow. I meet him sometimes at the Yorick Club, where I get invitations from other men. And he asked me to come and see his new play and gave me a seat. I knew you were in it, you see, and I wanted to see you without your knowing and judge your performance for myself."

"I was a failure, Mr. Phayre — a dead frost. I wonder they didn't give me the bird!"

"Nonsense, Beauty. You were a little nervous, but you had the whole sympathy of the audience — you looked such a child! Dry your eyes, dear —'Sweetest eyes were ever seen!'— and remember that you've got to-morrow night and all the other nights to get over your fright."

By his good gift of sympathetic insight Michael knew just how to comfort Beauty. He had never paid her compliments, beyond telling her that her beauty was an obligation to be good, and his praise had always had rather the guise of a sermon, at which she had wriggled uncomfortably; but now that she was humiliated and stripped of all her small conceits, he gave her back her self-confidence a little by the mere reference to her eyes. Yes, there were still advantages left to her, as he meant her to feel. She might not be a success off hand, but she had time to recover the ground she had lost, and — and her eyes were the sweetest ever seen! She wiped the tears from her face quietly, and crossing the Strand with him, struck

off down Villiers Street to the Embankment, the cool air from the river fanning her face and refreshing her.

Michael did not talk much until they had gone some way west, and then he looked down at the girl's white face and suggested driving the rest of the way. "I am tiring you, and I want to have a quiet chat when we get home. It is quite early. Will you ask me into your rooms?" he said.

"Yes, of course; but they are down at Chelsea. Shan't I be taking you out of your way, Mr. Phayre?"

"I live at Chelsea, too, now," said Michael serenely. "I have left New Cross and come into your neighbourhood again by chance. Here's a cab, and we won't walk a step further!"

Beauty told him the address, and sat silent during the drive. When she got out at her door, however, she hesitated a minute. Perhaps her finer senses were unusually acute to-night, for something held her back from asking Michael Phayre into those rooms. . . . She turned half-round, to say she knew not what, and found him standing patiently beside her, looking at her with the same frank friendliness that he had always given her. Then she opened the door and preceded him into the dark hall without another word.

Beauty's rooms — bedroom and two sitting-rooms, one leading out of the other — were certainly a great improvement on the combined apartment at New Cross. There was another smaller bedroom on a higher floor for her maid Janet, but the landlady cooked for her, and did so very well. There were no other lodgers in the house, and she had the exclusive right of the bathroom. Michael followed her into the

dining-room, where she switched on the electric lamp and showed him a comfortable, well-furnished room with a small table and low bookcases round the walls. There were two deep arm-chairs beside the fire-place, where a cheery little fire had been kept burning (for it was early autumn, though a warm night), and as by common consent they went over and took possession of them, facing each other across the blaze. The electric light was becomingly shaded with red silk; Michael could see Beauty's face more clearly by the light of the leaping fire.

"Well, Beauty," he said, looking round him quietly, "you have plenty of books!"

She fidgeted for a moment, twisting one of her curls around her finger in a way that he knew well.

"Mr. Phayre," she said slowly, "I'm afraid if you knew — you wouldn't approve!"

"Perhaps I do know, Beauty," was his still quiet answer. "At least I don't suppose you would afford these rooms for yourself, even on the salary you are getting, would you?"

She sat up with a little gasp, as if something were oppressing her, and looked at him with the innocent eyes of a child.

"If you like — I could give it all up?" she said bravely, and with a child's extreme simplicity in ignoring complications and going straight to the main point. "I could marry some one — I know I could. Would you like me to do that?"

Michael smiled at her as he might at a child, almost whimsically. "And what about the 'some one?'" he said. "Do you care for him much more than for your present — circumstances? For that is the only

reason that could really weigh with you, you know."

The "some one" in her mind had, of course, been Cuthbert Noble. He had actually come to the point of asking her to marry him, and Beauty, in a fit of perversity, had refused; but it had not put an end to the affair, and Beauty did not doubt that she could lure him back if she would, nor could she exactly say why she had not done so, since she half regretted letting the chance of marriage slip through her fingers. It was possibly because she never had a very consecutive plan of action unless driven into it by urgent circumstances or the opinion of some one stronger than herself. Left to herself she would probably have gone on neglecting to take advantage of Noble's infatuation, but she had no scruple in making use of it now, if Michael Phayre advised it. She did not understand the subtle morality that would have found such a union more criminal than an illegal connexion, if there were no sanctifying it by the spirit of love. To Beauty it was immoral to live with a man without being married to him, whatever the circumstances, and she acknowledged this even while she found it convenient to do it; but it was not immoral to induce a man to marry her for mere lust, knowing that she did not care for him, and that she was taking advantage of his lower nature. Thousands of girls think, and are taught by their Churches to think, like Beauty Darling.

"I'm not very keen on him," she said with brutal frankness; "not nearly so keen as he is on me. He asked me to marry him once — he *implored* me! — and I wouldn't because I knew there would be an aw-

ful row with his people. He was nearly engaged to a girl in society, and he chucked her just to run after me. He must be awfully gone, mustn't he?" There was a note of triumph in her voice, and she evidently thought that this would be a recommendation for such a marriage even to Michael.

"But, childie, you couldn't care for him the more because he had treated another girl badly," he said, with that half-pitiful smile in his eyes that he so often gave her.

"N-no," Beauty admitted, looking across the hearth at him to take her cue. She could not bear disapproval from anybody, but she really did not see why Michael raised an objection. "But it shows how keen he is!" she repeated. "You should just have heard him — he was off his head that night when he proposed to me. He went down on his knees — he did really — and he begged and stormed and said he wanted to kill us both!"

The melodramatic effect of the sentiment appealed to Beauty strongly, particularly when harmlessly repeated by herself and without the violence and reality that had terrified her in Noble. Michael Phayre was still looking at her in that curious, half-regretful fashion of his.

"And you don't care for him?" he said.

"Oh, well! he's the next heir to a baronetcy, and he's quite a big pot, you know. Not much money; but he's in the Guards, and he's the real thing as to family."

"Oh, Beauty!"— Michael really laughed, though ruefully, "that is what Cherry Bough or Folly Bird would say — it's not you. You're just a little parrot,

picking up the sentiments you hear round you, and not really meaning them."

"Poor old Folly!" Beauty unconsciously slid off the subject she could not cope with. "There's not much chance just now for her to marry well. I'm afraid she's done for herself."

"What's the matter?" His ready sympathy drew the truth from Beauty, though she lowered her voice.

"She got caught — some feller in a touring crowd she went out with. And he's in Australia now, and I don't suppose he'd make it all right even if he came home. That's why I was so sick at — at failing to-night, partly," she added with apparent irrelevance.

"Go on; tell me why."

"Well; Folly's in hospital, you see, and she'll be 'out' for some months anyway; and then there's the kid. I promised to help her, and I'm getting a good screw — if only I can keep the part! But I'm afraid I shall get my notice, and then Papa won't be pleased, for he got me into the Phœnix."

"They won't give you your notice," said Michael, leaning forward to take the cold little hands in his with a very kindly pressure. "You were much better than you knew, and your voice was delightful. You will be able to help poor Folly, never fear. Stick to that and the work, and never mind about marrying a man you only care about on account of his prospects; it's worth ten thousand marriages to be able to help our friends by our own strength. That's the real Beauty Darling — the girl who is working for two and is most anxious not to fail on the other girl's account."

"Then you — you don't mind — there's all this, you

know." She glanced round the comfortable, well-furnished room, with its shaded lights and fire.

Michael asked a question in his turn. He was no orthodox moralist, and most Christians would have been shocked at him — not Christ, but then Christ was not what we would call a Christian nowadays.

"Do you hate the obligation that goes with 'all this' Beauty?"

"I — don't know."

"Do you hate the man?"

"No — oh no. He is very kind —"

"Then I think, unless you both honestly agree that it had better end, that it is a far more honest bargain than the marriage you talked about. You owe him something —"

"Oh, yes, everything!"

That would have told Phayre who it was, if he had not guessed before. "Then pay your debts — even in this way," said Michael Phayre as he rose to go. "But when the mortgage is all off the property, and you feel you stand clear again, you need have no hesitation in putting it behind you and starting afresh. Good-night, my dear child — you seem a very dear child to me to-night! — try to sleep, and face your work with fresh courage to-morrow. I'm coming to see the play again at the end of the week."

"I'm afraid it will be still a frost!" said Beauty despondently, but she went to bed as he advised and slept off her sense of failure like a tired child. Nor did she get her notice. The piece went better on the second night in all its component parts, and Beauty found that other people's confidence increased hers. She was let off with "obviously nervous," and "not

seen to great advantage in her new rôle" by the first-night critics, but after all her part was a small one, and had not greatly affected the play. Beauty had again exaggerated her own importance, and found that nobody thought much of her fit of stage-fright, especially as by the time the notices came out in the weekly papers she had much improved, and several of these sending their representatives on the second or third nights, she was pronounced "very charming in her impersonation of a London waif," specially recommended for her songs, and said to be possessed of a talent that had hitherto found no scope in Musical Comedy.

Beauty could in fact play that one part, and gradually made it her own, so that she was said to have "created" it, and other girls with treble her dramatic powers founded their rendering of the character on hers when they went out with it on tour. The producer of the play shrewdly surmised that he was exceptionally lucky in getting the very best that was to be got out of Beauty Darling, and that if she attempted anything further she would fail hopelessly, unless some author wrote another part especially for her on the same lines. She was anxious to keep in real Comedy if she could, even after "Jacob's Ladder" was finished, but there is nothing more difficult than for an actress of Musical Comedy to keep her feet in Legitimate Drama without real and startling talent, unless it be the even worse case of some one who has played good parts on tour trying to get into London. Beauty had often listened to a chorus of despair on this subject, and rather wondered; but she began to find out one reason why London work seems to remain in the hands

of a little clique, and no storming of Agents' or Managers' offices will bring any result.

Behind the scenes at the Phœnix there was a regular bureau for the exchange of information, carried on in the dressing-rooms. Ladies with quite well-known names who happened to be out of an engagement came to tea on Matinée days, or to chat between the acts in the evening. They mostly went to Daphne Vansagnew's dressing-room, but they would often come up afterwards to see Mildred, and Mrs. Germaine's visitors were even more numerous. There Beauty, out of it in her corner, saw such well-known women as Miss Brampton (who was still one of the best dressed women on the stage, and came in a wonderful Paris frock that opened up new ambitions to Beauty), Sylvia D'Oyle (once a Satyr girl and now playing Shakespeare — with the Satyr accent!), May Burney, who was one of Lord Eger de Valence's discoveries, and had played Lady Teazle in her 'teens, and others who came after their own show was over merely to gossip. Every item of news as to what plays were to be produced, who had the filling of the cast, what influence was the best to back you, passed from one to another in the dressing-room, and before any outsider could have heard of a forthcoming play through the medium of the Agencies or the "Era," it was practically in the hands of the London clique, who were already possessed of the advantage of being known to Managers. Competition is keen on the stage. It was no wonder that a girl or a man remained in the provinces for years, while the old names reappeared again and again in the London bills.

"Is there anything going, dear? Do you know of anything that would suit *me?*" Beauty heard again and again, and if Mrs. Germaine had heard anything, or Mildred Vansagnew had a vague rumour to be followed up, there was pretty sure to be a return of courtesy from the visitor—"I heard to-day that Torrington is backing a play of Gurney's, and it's to be rehearsed in August. I should go and see him, Mildred—you've played in so many of Gurney's things."

The same dissemination of news went on in the Green Room Club for the men, but the women, having no such medium, were obliged to use the dressing-room. And it was not at the Phœnix alone, but all round London in the better-class theatres that it was going on. At Allonby's and the Satyr she had heard less of it, because those theatres kept the same names on their salary list for years, and one Musical Comedy is so like another that the same sort of parts might always be counted upon. But at the Phœnix a play would run for three or six months instead of two years, which shows the superiority of Musical Comedy over Legitimate Drama in its hold upon public affection; and after that there might be something of a totally different nature, and no chance for the girl who had scored a modest success in the supplanted play. It behoved her to go farther afield, to the Centurion, or Bingham's, or the Roscius, where in its turn another play was soon "coming off," and there would be a change of type in the production.

Beauty listened in a rather sulky silence to the gossip that went on, and kept her ears open for a hint that might be useful to her also. She resented being so much in the cold, and it seemed incongruous that all

the laughter and chatter should centre round another girl and an elderly woman rather than herself. She had once or twice had Cherry Bough or Barbara Sinclair (Mrs. Jack Simpson) to see her, but somehow she was out of touch with their immense hats and high-pitched voices in her new make-up and inartistic rags, and the quiet dressing-room seemed flooded with their alien atmosphere and flagrant prettiness. There was something too insistent in the Satyr girls' attractions when seen in a confined space; it was all right across the footlights, but it seemed to hit you and hurt you in a room. Mildred Vansagnew, who was not even strictly pretty, became a refined type if only by force of contrast, but there was just the shade of difference between Beauty Darling and Mildred Vansagnew that there would have been between Mildred Vansagnew and Lady Jane Lawless, Ivor Lawless's sister, had they been brought into comparison.

Beauty came in for a share of criticism herself, though she did not know it. When she was called for her scenes and safely out of the dressing-room, Miss Brampton nodded towards the deserted dressing-table:

"That's the chorus girl from Allonby's, isn't it? She is rather good from the front." Miss Brampton had seen the play after the first night.

"She had stage-fright when we opened," said Mrs. Germaine. "But she has steadily improved since. Yes, she plays rather well, but I doubt if she could do anything but 'Peggy'— she simply *is* 'Peggy' as far as her origin and outlook goes, I suppose. She has only to exaggerate her accent, and to give way to her own sentiments!"

"Stage-fright!" said Miss Brampton, raising her

handsome brows. "That is unheard of for an Allonby girl. She made a tremendous hit in that last piece with a song she sang. I wonder Allonby let her go."

"He wants to get her out of Musical Comedy and into something better, I think," put in Mildred. "At least, she told me so. She seems to be a protégée of his. I have always heard that he is very good to his girls."

Miss Brampton and Mrs. Germaine exchanged glances. They had heard before that Beauty Darling was a protégée of Edgar Allonby's, and they had also heard why. But there was no need to instil such poison into Mildred's mind. She was a frank, kind-hearted girl, and ready to make the best of Beauty despite their hopeless dissimilarity.

"Hasn't she a good voice?" she said cordially. "I never get tired of hearing her sing 'Buy my Lavender.'"

"Yes, and she has been well trained," Miss Brampton admitted.

"She is extraordinarily pretty," remarked Mrs. Germaine, which comment was sure sooner or later to be made on Beauty. "Even I like to look at her when she slips out of her rags and her make-up, and stands there like a white-limbed child, brushing her hair, and I am very old and *blasée* with regard to looks. It is a pity she is so impossible."

"Is she impossible?" said Miss Brampton, picking up the sky-blue cat which kept guard over Beauty's make-up box, and turning it round in amazement. "What a fearful looking thing! Whatever makes her have those china nightmares?"

"Oh, she has ever so many more at home — I think she collects them," said Mrs. Germaine, in a resigned tone. "We find her rather impossible, Mildred and I, but Mildred can tell you more than I can. You went to her rooms, didn't you, Milly?"

"Yes; Daphne and I both went. I don't mean that — oh, well, you know, Miss Brampton, I think it's *manner* more than anything else — and it sounds so uncharitable to say it. But I simply *can't* take her home to my people and introduce her to mother!"

Meta Chumleigh had made the same discovery when she attempted the same thing. The associations of all Beauty's stage life had not so far been such as would have altered her apparent origin, and her individuality was not strong or ambitious enough to lift her into a different class for herself. She was a girl who depended upon her surroundings and took her tone from them; and though she was gaining a surface veneer as her material circumstances bettered, she betrayed herself by her point of view more than by her speech, but most of all when she laughed. Miss Brampton was quick to recognize this, and the situation caused her to give way to cold, quick gaiety — Mildred's young, clever face was so frankly disturbed at the memory of Miss Darling at home! Neither of the Vansagnews were really pretty from the Allonby standard, though Daphne had been pronounced "lovely" by certain critics, in classical parts. Mildred was five-and-twenty and her sister three years older. Beauty thought them *passée* and no longer girls, though Mildred looked far younger than her age; but she was bound to respect the position they had gained by earnest study and talent and hard

work. Her engagement at the Phœnix was rather a distressing experience for her, for all the old standards of her stage career were altered, and in consequence she found herself very inferior and unimportant. Just as she had missed her usual make-up, and the advertisement of all her best "points," so she found that mentally she was also nowhere. The Profession was a serious thing at the Phœnix, and did not lead to supper-parties, and love-letters, and presents — especially the presents. Mildred had not a single trophy of this kind, because such as had come her way she had rejected. Daphne, the more famous sister, had had anonymous gifts that could not be returned, but she certainly did not boast by them. Mrs. Germaine was, in Beauty's estimation, an old woman, and past such experiences. And these three were the only women besides herself in the cast.

Beauty went to see Folly in the hospital in October. The child had been born earlier than was expected, but it was perfectly healthy — a heavy, lusty boy, flourishingly indifferent to the fact that he had no right in the world, and was the shameless proof that his mother had "got caught." Folly looked very pretty in her wrapper, lying on her pillows, and was full of the hospital and the life there, and what the nurses told her, and the few other patients of whom she had caught a glimpse. The immediate things of life filled it for Folly Bird. She hardly troubled herself even about the future, save that she was ecstatically grateful to the doctor for having brought her through "without a scratch on her."

"Just think, Beauty! He always attended to me himself — wouldn't let the nurses do it. They say

they never saw him so careful of a case. Doctor says he'll look me over carefully before I go out, and he'll bet a fiver no one could know it had happened!"

Beauty felt sick and queer again. This coming into contact with unknown maternity filled her with unreasoning dread, and it had been a real effort to visit Folly. She sat by the little white bed and listened — the bed where Folly had gone through such a horrible experience, such threatening pangs! — and the young mother babbled on, half foolishly, half coarsely, appraising her child's healthiness and size, and attributing it outspokenly to her own splendid physique and the doctor's care — "Though you wouldn't think such a baby could own a father like Renny Spiers," she said with the Satyr giggle.

The nurses moving to and fro through the ward glanced with interested curiosity at the friend who had come to see Mrs. Carter (Folly had appropriated her father's name again, with the married title), for they knew that it was Beauty Darling who had sung the "Cannibal Lover" at Allonby's, and was now at the Phœnix. Public opinion had generally pronounced her the prettiest girl on the Musical Comedy stage — perhaps the most beautiful of her type on any stage. What they saw was a slim girl in black, whose clothes were exquisitely made in the extreme of fashion, with an immense black hat that made a frame for her fairness. Yes, she was very, very pretty — but it was of a paler and graver type than the nurses would have expected. She was curiously unsmiling and unlike the girls on the picture post cards, and there was something almost startling in the long-

lashed blue eyes looking out of the small, soft face. Perhaps she and their patient were such very close friends that she had been overanxious, for Mrs. Carter certainly never suggested any other girl coming to see her, or spoke of them with the same vague gratitude.

"Beauty, you have been a darling pal to me!" Folly said, clinging to her friend's hand. "I don't know what I should have done if you hadn't stood by me as you have! I told doctor so, and he said he'd seen you in this new piece and you are so pathetic that it was painful! Think of that, and at the Phœnix! You'll be such a swell you'll never come back to us. Oh, I want you to see baby — you're to be his godmother, you know. Nurse, do bring back baby for Miss Darling to see."

Folly's frankness was not encouraging, but Beauty set her teeth with a shiver as the nurse placed a flannel bundle in her arms, and turned back the folds carefully so that she could see the red, crumpled face. The child, thinking that it was his mother, made an obvious movement towards her breast, and she was seized with a fierce desire to thrust him back in the nurse's arms, and shriek and flee. But the baby, not finding the nourishment he sought ready to his mouth, began a pitiful cry, and Beauty was instantly relieved of him by the nurse, who laughed and laid him down by Folly.

"There, I declare! — he wants his mummy! And he thinks every lady he goes to is going to feed him! Keep the clothes over you, Mrs. Carter. We don't want you to get a chill!"

Folly smiled, and lay back, suckling her child.

There was a certain contentment in the movement, and a familiarity in the way she held him in her arm that was worse than anything to Beauty. She felt that in Folly's place she would have refused to have the child near her — she must have hated it — she could never have nursed it. And yet Folly, who had fought so against its birth and would have done anything to destroy it unborn with safety, had slid easily into maternity, and took her functions as natural and even pleasant. Beauty sat and watched the mother and child in a kind of fascinated repulsion for a few minutes before she left, and it seemed to bring it home to her afresh with shocking distinctness. This was what it was to "get caught"— the unspeakable pain (Folly had given a highly coloured account of her confinement), the helplessness, and being handled by doctors and nurses as if she were a mere "subject," then this giving suck to the unwelcome child that drew its undesired vitality from her own.

"No, I could never, never go through that!" said Beauty Darling to herself as she walked way from the hospital. "I should either kill myself or — it!"

CHAPTER XI

JANET rang the bell of a house in Little Mayfair street, and then turned round and looked up and down the street for possible motors stopping at this or other doors. For it was her business to be curious, and all information was as her stock-in-trade. There was no one calling upon Mrs. Simpson or Miss Bird, however, as far as she could see, and the houses farther down the street were equally deserted. Janet turned again as the door was opened, and nearly dropped a parcel she was carrying.

"Well, I declare, my lord! Are all the servants dead and you doing their work?"

She spoke with free familiarity, for she knew the good-looking boy in the doorway fairly well. He was a tame cat in Mrs. Simpson's house, and was generally to be found there when Janet went to and fro with messages from her mistress to Miss Bird. He was in fact Lord Bannishmann, Lady Jane Lawless's elder brother. He laughed at Janet's remark and stood aside to let her in.

"The servants are out for the evening, and we're taken on in their place," he said. "I'm footman, Bartig is scullery-maid, and Hermal is butler. Come in, Janet — is that for Miss Bird?"

"Yes, and don't you crush it!" warned the maid, as he took it carelessly from her. "I'm in a hurry,

so I'll just leave a message and take back the answer if you'll kindly tell Mrs. Simpson."

"All right — I'll give this to Miss Bird" — he tossed up the parcel and caught it cleverly, unheeding Janet's exclamation and clutch at his arm. "What's the message?"

"Miss Darling will come round to-night after supper — she's sorry she can't come before, but she's engaged."

"All right," said the boy again, and Janet departed, warning him once more to be careful of the parcel.

Lord Bannishmann strolled into a room on the right as soon as she was gone, with the parcel in his hand. There he found Mrs. Simpson and Folly, looking over some costume plates and drawings which were plentifully strewn on the floor, while Lord Hermal, in his shirt-sleeves, was laying the table for supper and tendering advice.

"Who was that at the door, Bannie?" Mrs. Simpson asked as he entered, and Hermal left the room to fetch the dishes. She jerked the last fashion plate on to the already littered floor, and put her feet up on another chair. The last two years had not improved Mrs. Simpson; she drank gin stronger than she used, and she rarely spoke without an oath, the which, however, it is not convenient to record. Nevertheless, she was a pretty woman still, as in the days when gay Jack Simpson married her and learned in bitterness what daily association with such a type of girl can mean. Perhaps there was something to say on her side too, for he had taught her how to gamble with health and strength and a sound consti-

tution, and during the year they had lived together they had "gone the pace" from feverish day to sleepless night, until excitement became a necessity and drugs the inevitable alternative.

"It was Beauty's maid," said Bannishmann, dropping the parcel over Folly's shoulder into her lap. "She left this, and Beauty will come in after grub."

Folly gave way to a shriek. "You garden ass! You've screwed it all up in your hand, and it's my new nightie that Beauty's been embroidering for me. Beauty works just too beautifully — you should have seen —"

She stopped rather shortly and began to unpin the parcel. What it was that Lord Bannishmann should have seen were the baby clothes that Beauty had made for Folly's child and her own godson. They had not been a labour of love, and Beauty had sometimes paused to shudder at the thought that she might have been doing this for herself, and to thrust the dainty work out of sight, but she had been ashamed to confess her repugnance to Folly, who was as devoted to the baby as if she had had a legal right to him. It had been the natural maternal instinct, no doubt, but it gave Beauty Darling a feeling of further abasement for herself. When Folly was well enough to go back to the Stage the child had to be handed over to a foster-mother, and was sent into the country. How she had cried! A habit of playing with and accentuating the emotions, which is indissoluble from Stage work, does not lead to reticence in private life, particularly in such a girl as Folly. But as the weeks went on she had found it more and more convenient

not to have the child at hand, to be obliged to hustle it into the background or explain its dubious existence. Fate had favoured Folly. Her story had not gone beyond the gossip of certain dressing-rooms, and if the general public had heard rumours it did not half believe them even while it repeated them. Lord Hermal, Folly's most lucrative admirer, was away with his regiment at the time on foreign service, and when he came home on leave Folly was reinstated in the front ranks at the Satyr, and the young man fell a victim afresh. He was dangling now, haunting the house in Little Mayfair Street, and at present busy in the kitchen getting the supper ready. No wonder that Folly did not inform Lord Bannishmann as to what specimens he ought to have seen of Beauty Darling's embroidery!

"Janet told me not to crush it, now I think of it," said the young man languidly. "Let's look at the beastly thing, anyhow." He snatched an end of the garment and pulled it out to the accompaniment of another scream from Folly, and Mrs. Simpson looked up and swore at them for making such a filthy row.

"Come, it's not so bad!" said Bannishmann, with the air of a connoisseur, as the mass of silk and lace and embroidery fell through his hands in soft billows. "I'll ask Beauty to do me a suit of 'jamies' on the same pattern!"

"What's all this?" asked a rather deeper masculine voice, as Hermal re-entered with the wine in his hands. He put the bottles down just in time before he saw Bannishmann, whereat he gave a boyish yell and capered wildly round him, nightdress and all. "Where'd you get it, Bannie? Oh, my sainted aunt,

how improper! I blush for you all!" He hid his face with mock modesty in the folds of silk, and Folly jumped up and dragged him away by the simple process of her arms round his neck.

"I'll smack your head if you touch it!" she said, breathless with laughter and her struggle with the young man, for Hermal had caught her by the shoulders and was pretending that she was trying to kiss him and he wouldn't let her. "Oh, do dry up, you two kids! Babs, tell them to chuck it!"

Mrs. Simpson shrugged her shoulders, and declined to join in the *mêlée*. "Where's Bobbie?" she said. "I want my food. I'll dismiss the lot of you as no good for servants if I don't get it soon."

"Bobbie's in the pantry, smashing up the plates," chanted Hermal. "I say, Folly, what are all those fashion pictures strewing round for?"

"It's the fancy ball at the Sporting and Dramatic Club," said Miss Bird promptly, picking up a study of a young lady in "panniers" and thrusting it before his astonished eyes. "We want Beauty to go just like that!"

"It would be death to dance with her! The new 'hug' would never get there across those skirts. What are you going to wear?"

"I've got my dress — Fatima — trousers that will make you blink, and a turban up top! Babs is a Bacchante: she looks topping."

"Put it on to show us!" said Bannishmann. "Do! — wear it for supper!"

"Let's all rig up — the girls have got their togs, and we'll see what native talent can do for us!" said Hermal brilliantly. "Come on, Babs! Bannie shall

be the Order of the Bath, and I'll be a Greek God. May I use the sheets for drapery? Got any bath-towels?"

"You know best!" said Mrs. Simpson insolently. "Did you leave any last time I put you up? You and Bobby had a free fight in the bathroom, I know. Here, I want a drink!"

"But you will put on your Bacchante dress, Babs?" said Bannishmann, as he opened the sideboard with the surety of knowledge that he should find the gin-decanter and a siphon ready to hand.

"Oh, all right — I don't care. If anyone else turns up they'll think we are all dotty, that's all!"

"It'll only be Beauty, and she'll understand."

Beauty Darling was not, however, the only visitor that Sunday evening. Some one else had unexpectedly preceded her, and when she arrived she found more than the remnants of a supper-table presided over by Mrs. Simpson in fawn skin and tunic, with a wreath of tipsy vine-leaves falling from her unbound hair. Her appearance was so appropriate to the occasion that the remainder of the party appeared the less bizarre, though Folly Bird had encased her shapely limbs in delicate fabrics that did not by any means conceal them, and had discarded the yashmak to eat her supper in comfort, while Bobby Bartig had transformed himself into a very dirty chimney-sweep by aid of the household black-lead and sundry brushes. Hermal's bare arms and neck were as white as a girl's, and the sheet in which Folly had draped him made him more suggestive of a victim to the barber than the God of Day; but

Bannishmann was pronounced the most successful of the impromptu trio by reason of his silk pyjamas, the bath-towel arranged round him as a kilt, the sponge for the sporran, and a shaving-brush stuck in his improvised Scotch bonnet. Beauty laughed till she was breathless to recognize the three young men in the costumes in which they vowed they would go to the Sporting and Dramatic Club ball; but there was a fourth — a stranger to her — in evening dress, whose correctness made him look a still greater alien in the noisy party, and her mirth died rather suddenly in her surprise. Yet he was neither standoffish nor reserved in manner, for he was laughing heartily, and joining with some freedom in the jokes that the empty champagne-bottles had engendered. Beauty glanced at him before he was introduced to her, and hardly glanced again, though she was aware that he fixed his gaze steadily upon her from the minute of her appearance. But then men so often did that! He was a tall and thick-set man, some years older than the three light-hearted boys who were ruining themselves so cheerfully over Mrs. Simpson and Folly Bird — a man with reddish hair and bold strong eyes and a square jaw. Beauty thought him ugly on the instant, though she knew that he was "the real thing" (some years ago she would have said swell, or toff), and there was a certain soft spot in her heart for his peculiar colouring ever since the episode of George Mannering. She had really been fond of George, and he was the first man who had touched her fancy. Beauty was always kind to red-haired men in consequence.

"Well, you are hot in here!" she said good-humouredly, throwing aside her long furred cloak. "It's fairly cold outside."

"It's our costumes, duckie!" said Folly, with her eyes a trifle brighter than usual from the wine. "These silly asses of boys persuaded Babs and me to try them on, and then got up on their own as you see — so we had to have the room hot."

"The whole atmosphere is suggestively warm!" said the red-haired man, laughing, and looking at Beauty in her evening gown — she had been dining with a select party at the Ritz.

"Ah, d'you two know each other?" said Mrs. Simpson coolly. "The Duke of Leicestershire — Miss Darling!"

"No, I don't think we've met before!" said Beauty, leaning a little forward to put her hand into the Duke's hard palm. She remembered vaguely that he was a great hunting man, and very fast; married two years since, and though notoriously unfaithful to his wife, no use as a permanent catch. But since he was a duke, and his income was some hundred and fifty thousand a year, she was glad that her gown was one of Elegante's, and that it suited her so well. Her deep eyes, under the curled lashes, looked up at Leicestershire as he pushed a chair for her a little out of the heat of the fire, and the moist, red lips parted in a slight smile as she said "Thank you!"

"I think I had the pleasure of seeing you at Allonby's about two years ago," he said promptly, taking the seat nearest to her. The supper had given way to cigarettes, but Mrs. Simpson's glass was still half-full of champagne, and the young men were sitting

in attitudes more suggestive of ease than elegance. Lord Hermal and Folly, indeed, had pushed their chairs back and put their feet up on the table in friendly rivalry — Bartig was detailing a certain gossip to his hostess, none too clean — and Bannishmann was half uneasily watching the Duke. All three young men had been momentarily divided between embarrassment at being caught in such unconventional attire and the youthful conceit that made it a point for Hughie Leicestershire to see the intimate terms they were on in the house of a well-known and advertised stage beauty and a woman of notorious reputation. The Duke, however, was not even looking at his hostesses or their men friends; he was looking at Beauty Darling. "Didn't you sing the 'Cannibal Lover'?" he asked.

"Oh, that awful song!" said Beauty, with a little laugh. "I shall never get away from it. You don't know how sick of it I was!"

"Yes, and she's been asked about a million times to sing it for charities since," put in Bannishmann. "Parsons write to her as the 'Cannibal Lady' when they don't like to admit that they know her name!"

Mrs. Simpson broke into a line of the well-known song —

"He's — my — Cannibal! — my — black — Hannibal! —
Won't you come to dinner, and we'll serve you up a(s) stew!"

Then Folly took it up and the young men joined in, Bartig improvising a fine and unexpected tenor. Even the Duke caught the air in a good baritone; but high and strong and clear above them all soared Beauty Darling's voice as she took her old song out

of their mouths, as it were, and sang through the chorus, the others falling to a mere accompaniment. When she sang she tilted up her chin so that the characteristic shape of the jaw was thrown into prominence and the full muscles of her white throat rose and swelled. Leicestershire looked at her a little curiously, with the hard, intent gaze that he turned on a horse in the show-ring, but for the minute Beauty did not know. She had flown away on her round top notes, and her consciousness saw again the mass of white faces in the pit and gallery as the last bars went out across the footlights —

"Oh, my dusky lover, I'm a little Cannibal —
For I could — just — eat — you ——"

she paused, laughed, and added, with the old provocative challenge —

"—— with kisses!"

Somebody started clapping — was it Leicestershire? — and for a minute the room seemed as noisy as the theatre, with the inevitable burst of applause and answering laughter.

"Well!" said Beauty, with a little sigh and smile together, "I shall be back in it all to-morrow!"

"And you'll be glad, dear —" It was Folly who spoke, with open affection and admiration. There was a generous strain in Folly's nature, for all her coarseness and slipshod life. Her hand rested even now in Hermal's for all the company to see, but she did not mind, though every one present probably exaggerated the relations between them. "I always said it was a sin to bury you in little Comedy parts

when you might have been tip-top in Musical Comedy!"

"How long have you been away from Allonby's, Beauty?" asked Mrs. Simpson carelessly. "Nearly two years, isn't it?"

"Yes, I was at the Phœnix first, and then on tour with that crowd for six months. Then I went to the Centurion and to Bingham's, and toured again, and came back to this last show at the Roscius. I've played about six parts altogether."

"You know," said Bartig, with the authority of a very young man, "they never gave you a real show with your voice. Thelma or Kinross ought to have written a part for you that gave you a chance."

"Oh, I did pretty well with 'Peggy' at the Phœnix, and in that Japanese drama at the Centurion," said Beauty. "But you can't get on much further in Legitimate Drama as long as all the old hands block the way. Why, look here, there's Daphne Vansagnew at the Phœnix, and her sister at the Roscius, playing lead for the past five or six years at least (Daphne has, anyway), and the public are supposed to be so used to it they won't stand anyone else."

Beauty had a comfortable habit of ignoring the fact that the Vansagnews were very able and versatile artists, and that her own success had depended from first to last upon her name — the reputation of a unique face and the singing manner that had made the "Cannibal Lover." She had never been anything but Beauty Darling, and she never would be. That was why Edgar Allonby had not carried out his half-conceived scheme of starting a new house for Comedy, and starring Beauty. She had not proved herself

capable of the work she must have undertaken, and though the public had endured her impersonation of minor characters in good plays, they were after all only variations of Beauty Darling in different costumes.

"Theatrical stars ought to be put on to the half-pay list after a certain age," said Bannishmann sententiously. "They should be retired by force, like the Services, to make way for the younger fry. I suppose Allonby is awfully glad to get you back, Beauty?"

"Poor old Papa! He's looking very ill," said Beauty, with real kindness and regret in her voice. "If we had rehearsed a week longer I think he'd have broken down. He's just pushed us through and that's about all."

"He never really got over that operation seven or eight years ago," said Folly. "He looks older than our Nolly now."

Leicestershire had been listening in silence, his keen hard eyes always on Miss Darling, as if interested. He turned to her now.

"Tell me what this new piece is, and what you are playing. I'm only just up from the country for a few days, and I'm out of all this," he said frankly.

"It's the new Musical Comedy at Allonby's," Beauty explained courteously. "We open to-morrow night. I'm playing lead, as Mr. Allonby advised me to come back to the Musical Comedy stage. I've been working in real Drama for two years, and he thinks it's a pity to waste my voice."

"I quite agree with him — Allonby is a smart man, and a good fellow. I know him fairly well. I am

sorry to hear he is so ailing. Is it anything serious?"

"I am afraid so — rather. Well, of course we hope not! We should feel that the bottom of the universe had dropped out if anything happened to Papa; but he really ought to have a complete rest, and he can't take it because he's always producing."

Leicestershire had reason to say that he knew the great Manager well. It was Allonby who had handed him over to Nolly O'Donnovan and the Satyr years ago when he was only Marquis of Melton, with the shrewd remark that if he wanted mischief he had better find it amongst the Satyr girls than those at Allonby's; and at the Satyr Lord Melton had made the acquaintance of Miss Barbara Sinclair and had been reported as having "run her" for a brief period before she met and married Jack Simpson. Whether or no there was any truth in the *canard* the Duke was certainly an old acquaintance of Mrs. Simpson's, as well as knowing her divorced husband in his own world. When Barbara and Jack came to matrimonial grief he did not entirely drop the woman's acquaintance. He was shrewd enough to see that there had been wrong done on both sides; and in spite of her increasing fondness for stimulants and bad language, "Babs" Simpson was a very pretty woman, and she amused him — a reckless, ruined beauty, running downhill, but still playing the game with such boys as Bannishmann and Bobby Bartig. It was to see Barbara that he had gone to Little Mayfair Street, his Sunday evening threatening to be dull after an enforced family dinner, for he knew that at Mrs. Simpson's house he should at least be enter-

tained, not wisely but too well. He had never given another thought to the pretty child who had sung the "Cannibal Lover" two years ago at Allonby's, though he remembered her at once when he saw her. But he had not been in the room with her for five minutes before he acknowledged that he was attracted, and it pleased him that the little actress would stand the ordeal of criticism at close range and without powder and paint. As a rule he saw a girl first across the footlights, and was taken by some wickedness or wanton gesture before he exerted himself to get an introduction. In the case of Beauty Darling he had not even come to the house to meet her — it was merely the machinery of Fate, and he wondered a little whether she would have been any prettier or more seductive on the stage.

When Beauty rose to go the Duke rose also, and asked if he might see her home. "You must at least let me call a cab for you, for none of those extemporary footmen can do so in their present uniform!" he said, laughing.

"Nice set of servants I've got!" put in Mrs. Simpson insolently. The wine she had drunk had not apparently affected her, but the light in her eyes was a little more reckless, and her speech even more unfettered — she looked the Bacchante to perfection. "I shall sack the whole — lot of you, and go in for girls again."

"A month's wages, please!" said Hermal promptly, holding out his free hand.

"And a good character!" added Bartig.

"You haven't a character between you," said Mrs.

Simpson with her fearlessness of truth. "And you won't find one in my house! Good night, Hughie. Take care of Miss Darling for the honour of Allonby's to-morrow night."

Folly went out into the hall with Beauty to whisper confidences. Hermal was too *bluetink* (this was the Satyr expression of the moment for anything superlative), and wanted to marry her at once. Was it safe to take him? What did Beauty think?

"Take him at once — while he's hot," said Beauty almost fiercely. Supposing by another stroke of Fate Folly had to go through that again! And none could tell what she might give Hermal — Folly was too generous.

"But there's the kid —"

"Never mind the kid — he need not know; even if he finds out you can say he's your sister's child, and you are supporting him — it sounds well." Beauty gave a hard little laugh. "Don't hesitate a moment — *take* him! — I must go — the Duke has got a cab."

She kissed Folly hastily and pushed her back to the noisy supper-room, followed by a last whisper at her ear.

"Beauty, old girl, be careful of Hughie Leicestershire! He's as fast as a mad dog."

The gentleman in question was holding the door of the cab for Beauty as she wreathed the folds of her cloak round her and got in. He had not brought his own car to wait for him outside Mrs. Simpson's house, perhaps for obvious reasons; but he followed Beauty into the cab as a matter of course, and gave

the direction of the rooms at Chelsea as she instructed him. The girl leaned forward as the taxi turned round, and saw the front-door still open and Lord Bannishmann dancing derisively in the light of the hall — then the astounding vision went out in a slam of the door.

"They are all mad in that house!" she said, laughing. "Really Babs lets them go a bit too far sometimes."

"Bannishmann will find himself in trouble one of these days, if he is not careful," said the Duke quietly. "I suppose there is no chance of getting into Allonby's to-morrow night, Miss Darling?"

"Every seat's gone!" said Beauty, shaking her head. She looked at the man at her side with a little slow smile on her red lips, the faint triumph beforehand of being leading lady at the best House of Musical Comedy and not a seat empty! The Duke looked back, with that faintly veiled, devouring gaze of a beast of prey that Beauty had seen more often than not in men's eyes. She recognized it as a type of compliment, but remembered Folly's last whisper. This man was as fast as a mad dog.—

"Well, I shall try my luck with old Allonby, anyway. We used to be friends. I hope the old boy is not too seedy to be at the theatre."

"No, he'll be there; but you won't be able to see him."

"I must get in somehow, if I sign on as a scene-shifter!"

She laughed at the suggestion. "Why not wait a few weeks? It will be far better worth seeing then."

"I shan't be in town in a few weeks — besides, I

want to see you on the first night. Are you very nervous?"

"Awfully! I'm going straight to bed when I get home, to have a good night's rest at least. I didn't mean to go out to-night, only I was bound to dine, and then Babs and Folly are such old pals that I went on. Their rooms *are* hot though! If I caught a cold it would be serious. You see, everything depends upon my voice, with me."

He pulled up the window, which had been the least crack open. "Quite right," he said. "We must take care of you. But I suppose when the piece is runnin' you sometimes accept invitations to supper, don't you?"

The usual preliminaries of wooing! Beauty knew them so well. Suppers, luncheons, up-river parties on Sunday in the summer, the skating clubs in the winter; then flowers, and jewellery, and if a girl were of Jewish ancestry and could save her money there would be some little flutter on 'Change and a good investment. But that was generally when her Best Boy was in with, if not of, the Stockies. Beauty saw all this beginning in the suggestion of supper. It had begun so with Cuthbert Noble, whose advances were still made through such channels, despite her refusal to accept them. But her own work had come to her rescue, and she had seen less of Noble lately than she could have ensured by her actual will. The year after she left Allonby's her whole energies had been taken up with making Folly's living as well as her own, keeping the young mother and child and her own position as Miss Beauty Darling, late of "Cannibal" fame, whose notoriety depended upon her appearance.

To do her justice, nobody had assisted to dress Beauty since she left Allonby's, and her hats and frocks and furs had been no less expensive. Edgar Allonby's illness, and her own detachment from his theatre, had deterred him from paying her bills, openly or secretly; gradually his ill-health had drifted them apart, until Beauty felt without definite words that the situation between them was at an end. She was still sincerely attached to Allonby, and honestly concerned at his illness. But she had long lost the sense of his having been her lover. It seemed such a distant thing, and to have come to an end so naturally. Even her landlady had forgotten it in a measure, though Beauty still kept on the rooms at Chelsea, and paid for them herself, which sometimes meant that the rent was behindhand. The woman was, however, rather proud of having Miss Darling as a lodger, and took a sort of possessive pleasure in her, humouring her whims and looking after her comfort, the while she gossiped with Janet of the young lady's conquests and successes. Janet had stayed with Beauty, though a little scornful of the very small figure she cut in Legitimate Drama compared to her position on the Musical Comedy stage. Impertinent, familiar, outspoken even when it was not complimentary, Janet was still one of those influences in Beauty Darling's life that in a fashion owned her and exploited her.

Janet took care of her mistress as a property with which her own fortunes were identified. She did not rate Beauty as of much higher caste than herself, save for the miraculous gifts of her face and voice, but she kept the thin veneer of servitude for the world to see. For the last twelve months — since Folly

Bird had gone back to her work at the Satyr, indeed — Janet had kept her shrewd eyes open for a chance to turn her knowledge of Folly's "illness" to account, for the secret she had discovered in that letter to Beauty might be worth something some day — if Folly married, for instance. She looked for a suitor for Beauty also, and thought at one time that he had been found in Captain Noble — but Beauty was cautious for once in her life and had not, as yet, betrayed to Janet that she had actually refused to marry him, being, in fact, a little ashamed of her own reluctance, and quite aware of the point of view that Janet would take. Marriage, followed by divorce, was not so bad an advertisement, and the man's social position might open up further possibilities to Beauty — a second marriage with millions, or, if not marriage, a "protector" with the same to "run her." The affair with Noble had not come to a head as soon as Janet expected, and she was a trifle impatient. Beauty herself could not quite have told why she had not lured him back again, or accepted his overtures to renew the intimacy. She thought she had been a fool to refuse him — she was almost afraid to tell Janet — she always meant to make up her lost ground, but somehow at the eleventh hour it seemed easier to let things go, and she never made any real effort. For one thing, the study that was forced upon her very moderate brains with each new part left her less time for going about with the men who offered her outside entertainments, and the shorter runs that Comedies had, made such studies far more frequent than in the Musical Comedies that ran for two years before they were played out.

The one influence in Beauty's life that Janet hated and openly contested was Michael Phayre's. She attributed to him, rightly or wrongly, the patient year of harder work and less advancement, and she would have slammed the door in his face on the occasions of his rare visits, if she could. There was nothing to be gained, from Janet's point of view, in knowing Michael Phayre — he was not even a successful artist who painted society's portraits or had his pictures bought for the Christmas Numbers of the "Graphic." On the contrary, he seemed to find hard work and poverty so tolerable that his content would be reflected in Beauty after she had been with him, and the marriage for position or the big salary for little art seemed further off than ever. Janet was very glad that her mistress was going back to Allonby's.

Beauty did not for a moment think that the Duke of Leicestershire would be in front on the opening night of the new play, for she knew that the house would be packed, and he must try to get a seat at the eleventh hour. She did not even greatly believe that he was very keen, though she confided his acquaintance to Janet as soon as she got home, and gave herself a few airs about it — Beauty talked too much to her maid. Janet was on the scent like a sleuth-hound, and asked far shrewder questions than Beauty would have done, the while she brushed her mistress's thick curls and massaged her skin with cream to balance the effect of paint and powder.

"He wasn't there when I called with your parcel, for that fool of a Bannishmann opened the door to me, and I'll take my oath there was no one else but

the two others — Hermal and Bartig. I wonder how the Duke came there!"

"He knew Mrs. Simpson's husband — he told me so on the way home," said Beauty, yawning. "I don't suppose he'll get into Allonby's at all — he's only in London for a few days at most — just while the frost lasts and he can't hunt. He's not much like a London man."

"H'm!" said Janet, still busy with her fingers. "You don't know — it's something to be a duke if you want to get in where other folks are kept out. I shouldn't be at all surprised if he were there. Did he seem to mean it?"

"Oh, he meant it all right, while we were in the cab together," said Beauty with unconscious cynicism. "He may not mean it to-morrow, if there's a thaw."

CHAPTER XII

THE house was packed. Long before the opening night of the new Musical Comedy every seat that could be booked beforehand had gone, and as early as three o'clock the long queue at the pit and gallery doors had reached from Wellington Street into the Strand. Very few seats had been returned either, and so those people who trusted to their luck at the last minute were met with scant ceremony at the box-office, and turned away to await their turn some weeks hence.

There were several reasons for the rush. London had grown a little tired of the long runs at the Satyr and the Sovereignty, and though those pieces still drew good enough houses to pay, a fickle public wanted a new sensation — new tunes to strum — new wheezes to repeat. Then the "Gay Dogs" had been royally advertised, from simple placards to interviews with Edgar Allonby in the Halfpenny Press — Edgar Allonby, himself a good advertisement in his convalescence. Rumours of the novel features of the piece had got about — of something so audacious in the nature of a "kissing dance" that the Censor had had to be seduced, like Herod, with the performance itself, and had promised the performers Mrs. Grundy's head on a charger. Lastly, there was Beauty Darling, who had had her votaries from "Cannibal Lover"

days, and was reappearing at Allonby's after her year or so of Legitimate Comedy.

The Savoy, if nothing else, would have kept Beauty before her public. It was her Advance Agent and her Advertising Manager. She was so well-known in the supper-room there that other diners took her as a favourite dish in the menu, and were inclined to be injured if she were not on view. "When does your *foie gras* come on?" they might say, and in the same breath, "Is not Beauty Darling here to-night?" She was so pretty off the stage that it was worth while going to see her on, particularly in a part where a little more of her might be visible in the gloating limes that spared her no blushes. So the public came to see Beauty kissing and kissed, and the box-office man said, "We're full for three weeks ahead now — we shall fill for three months to-morrow or next day. Not a seat left — not standing room!" This was true, and had been true for some time; yet the days of miracles being with us still, his Grace the Duke of Leicestershire was sitting in a box on the O.P. side of the stage when the curtain rose, though, as he had admitted, he had no seat on the preceding night. Who shall say that the aristocracy has lost its power, or that there is no longer magic in strawberry leaves?

Beauty Darling herself was sitting in her own dressing-room, painfully nervous. It was the star dressing-room at Allonby's, on the ground floor, and for the first time she had it to herself, redecorated for her in pale blue and furnished with many other things than the regulation cane chair, dressing-table, and washhand-stand of the work day professional.

There was a Louis Quinze screen round the elaborate washing apparatus, and the rest of the room was rather suggestive of a cosy-corner interview than anything else. Beauty was sitting before the triple looking glass in the searching electric light, adding the last touches to her make-up, and swearing freely at every fresh knock for admittance which made her start in overwrought state.

"I declare it's too bad — worrying you like this!" said Janet, herself a little upset at the constant summonses, though she revelled in the new position. No one knew better than Janet the rights of a Leading Lady, though she had seen her mistress through many shared dressing-rooms. She went to the door at this last knock, and parleyed with some one on the threshold until Beauty grew impatient. "Who *is* it, Janet?" she said irritably, drawing the pencil slowly over the lines of her perfect brows that she would not alter in shape, but only darkened. "I wish you'd either send them away or let them in — there's a damned draught!"

"It's that journalist — Mr. Robinson, then!" said Janet in a loud aside, turning with the door-handle still in her hand. "Are you going to see him?"

"Yes, of course — let him in. Come in, Max!" Beauty went on with her lashes without turning round, and merely greeted the journalist with a continued question. "How do I look, Max? Have you been in front? I hope it's a good House. I'm so nervous, I'm sure to dry up!"

"Nonsense, Beauty!" said the new-comer with easy familiarity. He was a big young man, with commonplace good looks and an assured manner

which it is kindest to attribute to the influence of his profession. "How do you look? Ravishing!—and fit to ravage—eh? Have some fizz before you go on—you'll be all right."

"I wish I dared! But Eddy won't let me drink—says it will spoil my voice, and I shall go squiffy."

"Eddy be—! Tell him to wear the Blue Ribbon himself. I'll send you in a glass if you'll drink it," said the young man good-naturedly. He was very big and very black and white in his evening dress, and he seemed to overflow the delicately upholstered lounging chair in which he sat. "Seen our first page to-day?" he asked with the same exuberance. "It's great. A rumoured engagement between you and an M.P.!"

"No!" Beauty forgot her nerves, and turned round to laugh. "Oh, Max, you *are* a boy! That's a good Ad."

"The best you could have. If Chorley writes to the papers to deny it the thing will go in rag-time. It's a leader in the 'Post' on 'The disgraceful *canard* set afloat by the Halfpenny Press,' and an apology from us in leaded type. Then, letters to the 'Tele' and a correspondence. Your name's in all. Beauty, give me something for the stunt to-morrow!"

Beauty looked round her, seeking inspiration. Her brains were not of the springy order, though her face might be made of roses. It was Janet who nudged her. "The Beasts, miss!"

"Oh—there!" Beauty picked up Doggy-Babs and Cuddle-Puddles and thrust them at Robinson, laughing. "My Beasts, Max! Give them a show for themselves!"

"What the devil!"—Max Robinson caught the blue cat and the apricot dog in his hands and looked at them with sharpened eyes. "Beauty and her Beasts," he said, coming over to the dressing-table to examine the rest—birds with elongated necks, lions in trousers, dragons whose limbs turned in every distorted attitude, purple cows, and unicorns who had come out in a rash of bunches of flowers. He made a few marks on his large white cuffs, and shouted with laughter. "I'll christen the lot!" he said. "Leave it to me. What's this array of toilet soaps and scent?"

"Oh, samples. They want me to say I use them, that's all. That case of perfume is worth five pounds, Max, and will do me for six months. I don't have to buy much toilet stuff."

There was another knock at the door. Janet went to it, and Max turned round with the costly "samples" still in his hands. "'With Messrs. Sachet's compliments, and they hope for Miss Darling's patronage,'" he read with an indescribable twist of his mouth. "What's up, Janet?"

"Flowers," said Janet laconically, bringing in the scented heap. She laid a card down before Beauty, and parted a few of the velvet roses from the whole bouquet—just as she had done Mr. Chorley's lilies years ago. "Here, you'd better put them into your bodice," she said significantly.

The card was a plain one, simply written on—"Please let me see you later—if you are not too tired.—Leicestershire." Beauty and Janet and the journalist read it together, and Max Robinson whistled.

"Since when, Beauty?" he said.

"Last night — at Babs Sinclair's house."

"You know he was running Edna Carruthers once?"

"That must be *ages* ago! Why, she was snuffed out when I was a kid!"

"There's always some one. It was a girl in Paris last spring. Fact! I knew a man on our Rag over there who watched the whole thing."

"What do I care?"

"Well! — Are you going to see him?"

"What do you think?"

"You'll be a little fool if you don't!" said Robinson with conviction. "He's got money, and he's a duke anyway. Well, I wish you luck, old girl!" The voice of the call-boy echoed down the ringing stone passage, "Curtain up, please." Then came a thump on the door. "I must scoot," said Robinson. "Going to give me a kiss, Beauty?"

He made a feint of leaning over her, and the girl shrieked for her paint and powder and caught him a hard box on the ear. Robinson called out, laughing, and Janet added to the noise by ordering him out — "Now, I don't want my lady upset, Mr. Robinson! None of that, please. Out you go —" and he was pushed into the passage, there to fall in with the rush of a dancing troupe coming downstairs, who knew him intimately, and pulled him this way and that in rough horseplay. If it had not been the opening night the fun would have grown uproarious, but at a first performance everybody was a little anxious and subdued. The girls let Max Robinson go with a crumpled tie, and themselves made for the wings,

while from the dressing-room just above came the lilt of the Lead, trying his opening bars in an unaccompanied tenor.

Beauty was glad to be back amongst the sounds and sights she knew best, the careless singing in the echoing back ways (the theatre behind the scenes was like a barracks, and as bare), the comparatively easy rehearsals, the exemption from strain. In Comedy, as she had found, every movement counted, and every word must be fitted to the movement. "Put *both* hands up to your face, Miss Darling — now at 'Don't touch me' drop the left — now turn — isn't that better, Pope?" "Much better for me. Now I needn't move until my line. Do I crowd you, Miss Darling?" Beauty had found it wearying. Here, in Musical Comedy, there was much marshalling and drilling, but things were on the whole easier; the cast was not strung to concert pitch unless Syddie Hughes were really angry and began to bucket them. If somebody were "fluffy" on this opening night, another person would "gag" and save the scene dropping. When she left her dressing-room for the icy, whitewashed passages and draughty wings, she was nervous, as she had admitted; but she was not terrified and half delirious, as she had been on that first night of "Jacob's Ladder" when she had played "Peggy."

Her entrance was a pretty one, for she was pelted with roses by a laughing crowd of the chorus, already on the stage. She had of course been heralded by many allusions to her approach, and the audience were expecting her. The clapping began as she raced through the rain of flowers and stopped at the foot-

lights in the middle of the stage, standing still for a moment that the public might look their full at her before she spoke.

Oh, exquisite rose-petal face! Oh, Youth, seductive and passionate and breathing perfume! She was so audacious in the advertisement of her fairness, and yet so soft and round and dimpled — no line of tire in her as yet, no bruise visible upon the fruit of her womanhood. She stood as if abloom in the hot light of the theatre, while the audience called her name —

"Beauty — Beauty Darling!"

And in the stage box on the O.P. side the Duke of Leicestershire took up his glasses with a steady hand and focused them upon her. He was critical, this man of thirty-three, for he had sampled many lovely women, despite his heavy face and red hair.

But there was no flaw in Beauty. She was wearing a little white frock with a sailor collar that left her neck free, and a kind of crimped cap to frame her glossy curls and pretty baby face. The only spot of colour about her dress was the roses tucked into her breast, above her heart, which Janet had so skilfully detached from the rest. She sang well, for her training stood her in good stead, and after the quiver of the opening bars she regained her confidence. But it was at the end of the first act that the success of herself and the piece was assured, when she appeared in another dress for the "kissing dance," for which the audience had waited. Beauty's garments were very demure, and reached nearly to her feet, but as she slid out a small foot the draperies parted and betrayed the fact that they were split almost up to

the thigh, while, as she swung, the silk swung too, and for the moment bared her to the waist. It was not a waltz, though the rocking rhythm was in waltz time, for the man caught the girl's hands up in his as she stood with her back to him, looking over her shoulder, and always slipping away as he pressed closer. It was the symbol of the pursuer and the decoy, under the decency of sliding steps and a timed measure. Now he had her — now she swung under his arm and came again, alluring, mocking, while the audience strained forward, eager at second-hand for the fulfilment of a baulked desire. The men's faces in the stalls were a study, and the women gasped a little, wiping all feeling from their eyes lest something there should betray them.— Beauty raised her clasped hands towards her partner's mouth and caught a kiss before she broke away again — swung in the hollow of his arm and turned her face so that the caress was lost amongst her curls,— and always the light feet kept sliding time to the music; until, with a rush of notes, the stage lover caught the elusive figure as if in a gust of passion, dropped her head back against his shoulder, and with his lips pressed to hers carried her backwards through a fall of rose-silk curtains to some suggested bower. And the girl's abandonment of pose and upturned laughing face were the last that the excited House could see.

Edgar Allonby, sitting in the stage box with the Duke of Leicestershire, looked round on the deafening audience and almost smiled. He had seen many successes, but he had never seen a more uncritical triumph; for after all Beauty Darling was not a great artiste, either as an actress or a dancer — she was

simply offering the same wares that a beautiful slave-girl might in the marketplace. Even the Duke had not used his glasses this time — he was not appraising as when the curtain first rose. If his broad, heavy face had not been typically reserved it might almost have been a little moved, and indeed his healthy colour did seem to have deepened, and his eyes at least were full of unusual fire.

There were five calls, but the principal dancers did not repeat their whole intricate performance. Four other couples came on instead, and all together went through a certain portion of the dance, ending with the prolonged embrace, but with a more tempered exit. Then, of course, came the Comedians — really the artists of the piece — and the final clashing chorus that always brings down a curtain. The buzz of conversation that arose instantly after its descent sounded a little ejaculatory, and several stalls emptied themselves as if by magic; but after all the audience was British, and there was nothing to suggest that it was either startled or unusually excited.

"Look at those young fools!" said Allonby to his companion, as three or four young men with vapid faces and much shirt-front slipped out of the side entrances. "They are going round to the stage-door to try to get speech with my girls. They will catch nothing but a bad chill in this snow — this is not the Satyr."

"They're young," said the Duke, yawning. "Ten years ago I dare say I should have done the same."

"There's Cuthy Noble going now," remarked Allonby dryly. "He's just as much a fool as the rest, and he can't give you ten years!"

Leicestershire glanced down with some amusement in his face. "There are some old friends of his in the opposite box," he said. "Lady Bannishmann and her daughter. Is he going behind, or to their box — what?"

"He is going behind," said Allonby with quiet deliberation. "He is after my leading lady — but he will not see her. He had better have gone to Lady Bannishmann." "Papa" was generally correct in his information. This time it came through Janet.

"It is certainly a pity," said the Duke in a level voice, and he looked across the house at Lady Jane, very pretty and well-groomed, and apparently enjoying the comments of Sir Everton Toff — save for her troubled eyes. She knew quite as well as Allonby that Noble had left the stalls, and her heart had gone very sick as she watched her rival behind the footlights. The kissing dance did not even make her uncomfortable or shamed, for her clear eyes saw nothing but the prettiness and the grace and the charm.

"She is very, very pretty!" she said to herself honestly. "It is no use saying she is not, because one can't pick holes in her — if I were a man I should be just as mad about her as all the rest!" and then to Sir Everton: "I am enjoying it so much! I have never seen so many pretty girls together, and the comic man makes me laugh so!"

"H'm!" said Sir Everton, sticking his glass in his wicked old eye. "There used to be a better set at the Satyr — that's the show for pretty girls. Did you see Edgar Allonby, the Manager, in that opposite box? He's gone now — left Hughie Leicester-

shire alone. Hulloa! Hughie's got a note! — take the glasses and look, Lady Jane!"

"What are you telling Jane?" said Lady Bannishmann, turning round at the last words. "You are not to enlighten her mind — Hughie Leicestershire, did you say? Has one of those chorus girls written to him, really? How disgraceful — and how amusing!"

It was quite true that the Duke had risen and gone to the back of the box to receive something from an official, but as a matter of fact it was merely a verbal message. "Miss Darling would see a few friends after the play was over, and if he would care to come round with Mr. Allonby." The Duke tipped the man, and strolled back to his seat, quite unconscious of "Everton Toffee's" active glasses.

Beauty was not seeing anybody between the acts, for she was really tired, and exhausted with excitement and the strain of the performance. Janet stood like a dragon at the door, and only grudgingly admitted the names of those whose luck or persistence had got their cards through by well-paid hands.

"Here's Captain Noble — you had his flowers earlier. You won't see him, I know —"

"No, I really can't. Give him my love — say I'm played out — tell him to come some night next week."

"And Mr. Lawless?"

"No — nor him either."

"Lord Bobby came round before — while you were still on — and Hermal. I sent them both away."

"Quite right."

"And that Michael Phayre —"

"Who?" said Beauty sharply. "Mr. Phayre? When did he come?"

"Just now — Mr. Jester brought him through." (Jester was the Comedian, and a "pal" of Beauty's. They had toured together.) "They are old friends, I suppose."

Beauty had started up restlessly from the sofa where she had thrown herself. "Did he go to Mr. Jester's dressing-room? Is he still in the theatre? I'll see *him* — I want to. Go and see if he is still there, Janet —"

"But —"

"Do as I tell you!" said the girl angrily, with something of the accent of Peckham in her voice. "If I want him you'll fetch him — or you'll go. I *will* have what I want!" and the blue eyes filled with hysterical tears.

Janet shrugged her shoulders, half as angry as her mistress. She hated Michael Phayre. But she ran down the passage and up the stairs to Jester's room — he was a floor higher than Beauty, and so far removed from greatness — hoping that the artist might have left. He was still there, however, smoking cigarettes with three or four men in the frank Bohemian fashion that he seemed to find so easy even while he kept his strange aloofness, and he got up and followed Janet at once.

"Come back and have another drink, old fellow," said Jester cordially. "Miss Darling won't let you stay long. It's an all-night sitting here."

"Give her our love," said another voice. "And all the very best. We don't get a chance to speak to her during the Show, and she's a real Darling."

"All right!" said Michael, laughing.

He came into Beauty's upholstered dressing-room with the old kind smile in his strained eyes, bringing with him a whiff of the hard days when they shared their poverty together, and Beauty Darling sprang up with both hands outstretched and a quivering mouth.

"Oh, Michael!" she said breathlessly, and he knew that she must be very overwrought by the sudden use of his name. "I've just been longing for you — I wouldn't see anyone else, but I felt you'd do me good!"

"Why, Beauty," he said, sitting down with her on the dainty couch, "this is perfectly lovely of you — and on the night of your great success, too."

"Ah!" she said quickly, and her voice dropped lower, "you were waiting for me on that dreadful first night of 'Jacob's Ladder,' when I failed — I wanted you to come when I succeeded."

"But it wasn't a failure," he said calmly. "It was only a first step that faltered a little. And look what a lot of good your year of training has done you! You wouldn't have been such a success to-night if you hadn't played all those parts in Comedy."

"Do you really think they did me good? I hated it, you know. I was glad to come back to this."

"I am sure it did"— he paused a minute and looked round with some surprise, for Janet was banging things about the dressing-room in a very bad temper, making as much noise as she dared. Beauty heard too, and flashed round upon her with exasperated nerves and the anger of a child.

"How dare you make that damned noise, Janet!

You're doing it on purpose, because you know I want to talk to Mr. Phayre. I won't have it — do you hear? Go out of this room, and stay out till I ring for you. Go to hell! — do you hear? You'll kill me, upsetting me like this!"

"You'll kill yourself talking when you ought to be resting," said Janet, with an equally raised voice and her own impertinence. "Go out of the room, indeed! Yes; and if I don't come back, who's to finish dressing you? Now you're on the verge of crying — that's nice, with all the act to sing through. I wonder Mr. Phayre hasn't more sense than to come in like this when you're —"

"Go out of the room!" screamed Beauty, her eyes flashing like a small virago, and throwing the nearest thing at Janet in her passion — it happened to be a heavy silver-backed brush, and it fell with a loud bang on a vase of roses, which it broke. Both women were so angry as to be almost beside themselves, but the scene was rather abruptly ended by Michael Phayre taking Janet by the shoulders and putting her into the passage. She was so surprised that she did not attempt to re-enter the room, but stood there sobbing. They could hear her through the door.

"Now, Beauty, you're not to cry," Michael said authoritatively, sitting down on the couch again by the girl's side. He looked at her, heaving and panting still from her gust of passion, the tears rolling down her cheeks, and marvelled that she should be so beautiful in such a mood. All the trickery of the stage was gone from her for the moment, and she was so natural that she was almost noble without her usual airs and graces. She stretched out her hands to him

impulsively, and he took and held them firmly, while she struggled to obey him and recover herself.

"Oh, Michael, I'm so — upset!" she gasped. "That beast of a woman! I'll send Janet away — I'll speak to Ed — to Mr. Allonby."

"No you won't, Beauty, not without thinking it over. Janet is devoted to you in her own way. What is all this upset? Not only the strain of a first night?"

"I don't know — I'm frightened!" Into the big blue eyes crept the terror of a lost child again, a look that Michael had seen there once or twice, and that always made his heart ache. "I feel as if something were going to happen to me — something dreadful."

"From one particular person?" said Michael quietly.

"Yes — no — I don't know. It's only since last night. I told Janet something had happened.— I didn't think much of it — but I know she's got it in her mind. She's working for one thing — she means me to have him," said the girl confusedly. It seemed as if she hardly knew what she said, for Beauty was not imaginative, but in her highly strung condition she was almost prophetic.

"To marry him?" Phayre was thinking of Noble, and a slightly worried look darkened his eyes. The marriage of a girl of Beauty's type with Cuthbert Noble could only have one ending in Michael's sad common sense — a few years of reckless excitement and extravagance that might teach her fatal habits, and then the inevitable separation or divorce, and a rush downhill back to the gutter "from which she came!" in Mrs. Darling's ominous words.

"No, not marriage; he is married. Oh, I have given Cuthy the chuck — I know you're thinking of him."

"A married man! And Janet wants you —"

"Yes, you see he's — well, it's a good ad., and a girl gets known. Besides, there's a lot of money in it. I've hardly seen the other either, oh for ages! — you know, my rooms at Chelsea."

"I'm almost sorry for that, Beauty," said Michael Phayre with brave frankness. "He kept you very straight, you know, and he's been good to you. You owe him something."

"Oh, yes; everything!" The tears welled into her eyes again. "It came naturally, Michael — I didn't break with him myself."

"And he's not a young man now —"

"I know — can't you see I'm sick with myself about it? And he's been so ill —"

"Who is the other man that Janet favours?" asked Michael quickly. "You don't want to tell me, Beauty! You're putting it off!"

"It's — the Duke of Leicestershire!"

"The Duke of Leicestershire!" This was such a high flight for Beauty that Michael almost doubted. No wonder Janet wished it, if it were within the possibility of truth! Royal favour was only a step further. "Are you sure?" he said.

"Well! — I met him at Babs Sinclair's last night; and he's got into the theatre somehow to-night, though you know we were full weeks ago. He sent those roses," nodding at the upturned vase. "He's with Papa, in his own box — they're coming round after the show."

Michael drew a long breath. "Only last night!" he said blankly. "What are you going to do, Beauty?"

"I don't know!"

"You are afraid of him?"

"How did you know?" she said, with that strange childish look in her face again. "I wasn't at first — I didn't think much about it. But to-night when he sent the flowers — and then I knew he was in front — and I saw what Janet was up to." She paused and shivered. "I am horribly afraid," she said. "And yet —"

"And yet he's a duke!"

"No, it isn't that, though it counts," said Beauty, and her voice rose almost to a little cry. "But he's so strong — he would ride roughshod over you. And I feel somehow like a rat in a trap when he looks at me. At first I thought it might be rather good fun, just while he was in town, to have some one young, and jolly, and ready for a good old time — but, to-night — it suddenly began to look different —"

She ended with an hysterical little laugh that met no answering amusement from her hearer. All he did was to repeat his former assertion with curious insistence.

"You are afraid of him! Why are you afraid of him?"

"I tell you I don't know. I feel as if something dreadful were going to happen."

"Through him?"

"Yes — I suppose so."

"Can you say No, Beauty?"

"I said it to Cuthy Noble!"

"Then say it to Leicestershire."

She did not answer; but he saw her small hands tremble as she pulled some drooping roses from her breast and flung them on to the dressing-table. He did not know Beauty Darling in this mood, and it worried him to find the right way to help her. At the best, she was so overstrained and nervous that she was deluding herself for no reason; but even that he would have liked to have soothed and put right for her. At the worst — but he was not to come face to face with that until another first night which lay ahead.

He had no chance to say more now, for Janet knocked at the door at last, in a subdued and injured manner much at variance with her usual assertion. Beauty took no notice of her when she entered; but Phayre rose to take his leave, for the call-boy was beginning his startling knocks all down the stone passages.

"I hope the second act is not very tiring for you," he said kindly. "But anyhow the piece is a great success, Beauty."

"It's awfully sweet of you to come round and tell me!" she said, once more the Musical Comedy Star. "Are you going back to Lawrie Jester? He's a good sort! I didn't know you knew him!"

"I left him arguing about his Press-agent," said Michael, laughing. "The fellow thought the job was worth five pounds; Jester said ten shillings! I don't think I'll venture into the fray again."

"They're awful frauds," agreed Beauty. "But you must have an Agent. They sometimes influence the public — they never take in the Managers, any-

how. I'd rather have the real reporters, like Max Robinson, who'd do anything for me; but Lawrie Jester has been out of London and doesn't know anybody on the papers. He'll have to have an Agent at first."

Michael shook hands with her in silence and went his way down the echoing corridors. On the stairs leading to the stage-door were two or three young men in evening dress with well-bred, vapid faces, waiting for the chorus girls already, and beyond the door itself a string of private motors, representing just so much wealth and so much folly.

"H'm! the Allonby girls are in request to-night," said Michael Phayre, as he walked quietly past the doorkeeper and out into the stinging cold of the winter night. A man talking to the doorkeeper turned and looked at him sharply, showing a handsome, dissipated face and eyes that were too lined for his age. It was Cuthbert Noble, and Phayre guessed at his identity, without, however, realizing that the young man would have given most of his worldly prospects just then for the privilege which the struggling artist had just enjoyed — a *tête-à-tête* with Beauty Darling in her dressing-room. Michael went round to the front of the house again, and his modest seat in the upper circle, booked weeks ago, and turned a pair of old opera-glasses on the Manager's box. He found "Papa" easily, the big man with the broad, clean-shaven face, looking unusually flabby with illness, for Edgar Allonby had returned to his place to see the curtain rise on the second act; and beside him Michael could just discern another figure in evening dress, sitting rather back, with his head turned away. By dint of neglecting the stage and keeping his glasses

focused quietly on that figure, the artist at last got the view he wished, and saw a young man with reddish hair, a heavy line of jaw, and nothing, certainly, at all ducal about him.

"The ordinary fox-hunting squire!" he said to himself. "I wonder why Beauty was afraid?"

Beauty wondered at herself an hour later, when, in the midst of laughter and handshaking amongst the Principals of the company who were gathered in her dressing-room, the Manager walked in, accompanied by his companion in the box. There was champagne going at last, for now that the success of the first night was assured, and the frantic calls taken and retaken, Allonby had himself sent round the wine and sandwiches for the majority of his cast. But Beauty put down her glass with a hand that was not quite steady as she met Leicestershire's eyes across the width of the room. Her blood raced in her ears and her heart stood still for one dreadful moment as she waited there, paralysed. It was as if some overwhelming force were advancing to claim her — not love, but naked terror.

"You must be very tired, Miss Darling!" he said as he reached her and shook hands. "Too tired to come out to supper?"

She shook her head faintly, trying to still the panic fear in her heart and to answer with her usual assurance.

"If I ask Allonby, too?" he said in a lower voice.

"I'm too awfully tired for anything, thanks — I'm going straight home."

"But you did that last night!"

"Miss Darling," said Oscar Bennett, the leading

man — he had been Beauty's stage lover of a few minutes since —" Mr. Allonby has ordered supper at Fradelle's for us."

" Oh!" said the girl, a little nonplussed and still labouring under that unusual excitement and sense of distress. " I suppose then — But I was going home!"

" Come along, dear. You must show, but you needn't stay long," said Allonby himself, coming forward to speak to her hurriedly. " I can't do without my leading lady!"

A sudden memory came over Beauty Darling with the words — a memory of a little girl in a short skirt and a sailor hat sitting in a deep chair in the Manager's room at that very theatre, and telling him that she wanted to go on the stage, and of how he had laughed and introduced her to his subordinates as his new leading lady! How far off the kindly irony had made it seem then! And now it was accomplished. But on this night of fulfilled ambition there was that strange, bitter taste of apprehension, and the presence of a man whose social position would have made him like an unattainable hero of penny novelettes to the child who was once Beauty Darling. She turned her deep blue eyes on him slowly, and found him as steadily regarding her. Beauty knew that look, and read what it portended. Many men's eyes had brought her the same message, and some she had rejected and some she had half allowed. But she had never met it with the same hopeless thrill of fear that struck her from the rather plain and subtly brutal face of the man who happened to be born a duke. Ah, but it was the man! the man! If he had been a common labourer and Fortune had willed that their destinies

should cross, she knew that she would have found her master.

"I wanted to have you all to myself,— but I suppose we must accept Allonby's invitation," whispered Leicestershire as he lifted the fur coat on to her bare shoulders. Beauty had already changed from the scantiness of her stage costume into an even scantier evening gown. There was plenty of her in view to advertise the little that remained hidden. But the dimpled softness of her arms and neck were like a child's, and her skin could stand the test of the brilliant lights in the dressing-room even though the paint was honestly removed from them.

It was not a late supper-party, though it went with the fizz of champagne, as Lawrie Jester declared. Every one was in capital spirits, and the excitement of the night seemed almost a tangible and evident thing, like the froth on the sparkling wine. They drank Beauty Darling's health, and Allonby's, and Oscar Bennett's, and Lawrie Jester made a little speech for Beauty in answer, at her own request, though he was the least important amongst those few of the Company who were present. But Edgar Allonby's state of health excused him from speaking or from staying late, and he got his leading lady away before the rest of the party broke up, on the plea of fatigue. Leicestershire accompanied them to the street where the cars were waiting, and offered to take them both home; but Allonby had his own Siddeley in attendance, and declined the offer.

"I want you to come on a little shopping excursion with me, to-morrow — will you?" Leicestershire asked Beauty as he helped her into the landaulette.

She hesitated, and he added, "Let me call for you at least, and see if you are not too tired?"

"I shall probably be asleep still," she said, laughing.

"If I come about half-past twelve? We can lunch somewhere, and then get to the shops."

"I might be up —" She had not meant to give him even so much chance, but her lips seemed to answer for her without her will.

"I shall come anyhow and see!"

He fell back as Edgar Allonby followed them out of the restaurant, and shook hands easily with the Manager.

"Awf'ly good of you to let me in to-night," he said in a different tone. "Wouldn't have missed it for anything. Hope Miss Darling isn't fagged out. Good night!"

Allonby nodded good-humouredly — his importance was undisturbed even beside a duke — and took his seat in the car, next to the girl. It was not until they had started that he discovered that she was lying back in the corner with her hands covering her face.

"Beauty!" he exclaimed, in real and kindly dismay. "Why, little girl, you're worn out! Beauty, what are you crying for? You'll make yourself sick, dear!"

"I don't know!" she gasped, clinging to his large, knotted hand — the hand of an elderly man for all his care and habits of luxury. "Oh, Eddie, I'm frightened! I'm not strong enough —"

"For the part, do you mean?" he asked, startled. "Rot, little girl! You did splendidly. You only want a few weeks' run to get into it."

"I don't mean the part." Her voice came in strange pauses, a little hoarse from the hard work of the evening. "I'm not strong enough for life!" said Beauty Darling.

CHAPTER XIII

THE salary of a Musical Comedy Star may range from thirty pounds a week up to anything over eighty. In Beauty Darling's case it was thirty pounds for her first star part, and she was signed on to Edgar Allonby for three years, during which she was to advance to forty and then fifty pounds a week, providing that she was a success. This is a provision skilfully inserted in the contracts offered by Managers to girls who are "coming" but have not yet come. Beauty had certainly made a hit with her song, "The Cannibal Lover," two years ago, but she was not then even playing second lead — she was only a girl raised out of the ranks of the chorus with a "special turn," and it did not follow that either her voice or her personality would satisfy the public for two expansive acts of Musical Comedy, during which she was rarely off the stage except when the Comedians were expressing themselves like nothing on earth but San Mackintosh or Lawrence Jester. (It is for this reason that the book of a Musical Comedy has such vague suggestions to make to the Comedians. The Author may describe them as "A Devonshire Farmer" or "Lord Tilbury's Scotch Servant"; but he knows that such characters will merely be converted into a Sam Mackintosh part or a Lawrie Jester part, and will be played according to the men — certainly not according to any directions he might give.)

Beauty Darling took the thirty pounds a week gratefully. She had been drawing eight or ten for the small characters in real comedy which she had played for a year, and it had been much harder work to her, though the parts themselves were insignificant. Out of her thirty pounds she paid four guineas for the board and lodging in her rooms, and at least a pound for extras; but if this seems exorbitant, it must be remembered that her landlady was an eminently respectable person in appearance and manners and had countenanced many things, including Edgar Allonby. There is a certain tale of a Scotch theatrical landlady which is illustrative of this attitude, and is known to most professionals. She was, unexpectedly, asked to accommodate a bishop and his wife on some unforeseen occasion, and when asked her terms, could not dissociate herself from her usual lodgers. "It's twelve shillings if ye are truly married," she said dourly, "and fourteen if ye are living in sin!" meaning it to be understood from the first that a man must pay for his indulgences. Beauty, therefore, paid four guineas and extras without being able to object; but from the time of her larger salary she received no help from Allonby, and indeed had an unacknowledged eagerness to be independent of his actual monetary assistance. A change in their relations had come about naturally, as she stated to Phayre, and she and "Eddy" had parted in one sense, though she was still his protégée and he took the sincere interest in her that a man may in the assets of his business, as well as a personal kindliness perhaps born of the old sentiment. Nobody ever denied to "Papa" the milk of human kindness, shrewd man of business though he was.

Out of the remaining twenty-five pounds Beauty had to pay Janet — for that astute young woman drew her salary as a Dresser at the theatre and made money out of her private capacity to Beauty as well — to find the fees for the theatre people, and to pay for such meals as she had at the theatre and her fares to and from her rooms (since she was not a "keep" she had no motor-brougham), and to dress as a leading lady of Musical Comedy. Add to this the claims upon her by other ladies in her profession who were *not* so lucky as to play lead, and the traditional generosity of theatrical life, and it will be seen that there was not that margin from which to put by for a rainy day that the uninstructed always urge against improvident stage people.

The clothes were the chief difficulty, though Beauty could get credit now, and certain dressmakers were willing to work for her on the advertisement system. A Musical Comedy girl should wear underclothing that runs up to fifteen and twenty guineas the set and furs that suggest hundreds. The latter may easily be given to her, but though smaller articles of jewellery need not be paid for, donors of sables and squirrel coats have generally struck a bargain for their full value. Beauty had been hampered by Edgar Allonby's proprietorship and some curious hesitation in draining Captain Cuthbert Noble for the gifts he was quite ready to bestow. Never very strong in the commercial instinct, Beauty had by no means got all she could have done out of that young man, whether she had granted favours in return or no.

"Why, if he were *my* boy," said Cherry Bough frankly, "I'd have touched him for ermine and shut

the door in his face afterwards if I didn't feel inclined. . . . You are a top-story fool, Beauty!"

"Then he wouldn't have offered to marry you!" Beauty retorted, goaded into confessing that she had had this chance and let it slip. "He was awfully keen, just because I didn't bleed him."

"Well, you *wouldn't* marry him anyhow, so it needn't have mattered," said Cherry philosophically. "You might just as well have had a good time."

"He wasn't rich enough for me," said Beauty, with feeble imitation of the real worldly wisdom that owed its inception in Cherry and her kind to generations of Petticoat Lane and Houndsditch.

"All the more reason to take what you could get. It's better for you that *he* should get into debt than that *you* should!" said Cherry shrewdly.

Beauty was beginning to feel the bitter truth of this, for she was in debt for the first time. Even during the darkest days of her career, when she had lived from day to day on a dwindling capital in New Cross, she had never owed money, possibly because no one would have lent to her then except Michael Phayre, who was as poor as she, and who — though she did not recognize it — had been the quiet influence to prevent her doing so of other people. But with the improving of her position she began to run up bills — not very large ones, it is true, and she generally managed to partly pay them off, though it hampered her — until by the time the "Gay Dogs" started with her as leading lady she was uneasily conscious that she had a steadily increasing account with certain houses which would send in bills at the quarter that she could not pay. Her early training had made this much more of a dread

and discomfort to her than it would have done to feckless Folly Bird, or to Barbara Sinclair, who had come to regard debt as a mere adjunct of smart life since her marriage to Jack Simpson.

It was at this vulnerable juncture of her life that the Duke of Leicestershire's suggestion to "go on a shopping expedition" came to Beauty Darling. She knew, of course, what it meant, and the equivalent to be asked of her — sooner or later. She had read it in his eyes last night with the fatal certainty of past experience. He had almost made up his mind when he met her at Babs Sinclair's perhaps, but he had hesitated until he saw her successful in the test of the footlights. The admiration of other men aroused the sportsman's instinct in Hughie Leicestershire — always a mighty hunter — the knowledge that Cuthy Noble was going for the same prize spurred him on to "ride jealous" and show him the way if he could, and, lastly, the kissing dance had transformed his half critical admiration to mere animal passion — a man's natural desire to snatch the girl who had thrilled him at second hand out of other arms than his own and experience that actual sense of possession. There was something about Beauty Darling, despite the familiar allurements of paint and powder and stage tricks, that made men mad with longing to crush the softness of her face against their own, as if she had been Youth incarnate.

Beauty slept late into the morning after the first night of the "Gay Dogs," for she was after all only twenty-two, and Nature healthily reasserted herself. At eleven o'clock Janet brought her in her breakfast, and saw that she roused to eat it and did not fall

asleep again, for she knew quite as well as Beauty who was coming later on to take the girl out. Beauty was an asset in the business life of Janet as well as to Edgar Allonby.

After her breakfast Janet got ready her mistress's bath, and scented it with *eau de toilette* from the useful "samples" offered to her patronage, and perfumed and adorned the girl's body for the sacrifice as professionally as any old Jewish priest. She brushed and anointed the bright curls with the eye of a connoisseur, and brought out costly underclothing from Beauty's wardrobe, smelling of a delicate French powder that had lain in its folds. Her ministrations refreshed Beauty as much as her sleep, and there was no appearance of fatigue about her when she was dressed; but a certain nervousness betrayed itself in her every movement, so that she started twice at the sound of a door opening and shutting, and her hands trembled. Janet pondered over the symptoms and marvelled a little contemptuously.

"What's she afraid of?" she said to her own ugly consciousness. "*She* — with all her experiences! If she was a young girl going to be married she couldn't look queerer! — You'll wear your hood in this snow?" she added aloud.

"Snow! Is it still snowing?" said Beauty. "Yes, I suppose so, and that big coat with the mink collar. I wish it were sable, mink is so hard."

"You can have sable if you want, I don't doubt," said Janet brutally. "Who sent those fur boots? Noble? They're none too smart."

"Never you mind — it's not your business. Put

them on," said Beauty crossly, stretching out her small foot. She was really beautifully made, with her perfect proportion of limb that would be the ideal of Eugenics if the science were successful. Janet buttoned the little fur boots, and hooked her into a velvet gown, minus a collar, of course, but would not have her ready dressed to go out until the car actually came. She knew the value of making a man wait, even when he was a duke.

It was a year of hoods and close bonnets for motoring. When Leicestershire arrived, and asked if Miss Darling were too tired to come out with him as she had promised, he learned that though not ready for such an excursion the young lady would be very pleased to come and would dress at once. He had just time to look round the sitting-room and decide that it was an unworthy setting for the new stage jewel, when the jewel herself entered, and for a minute he was almost tongue-tied, despite the advantages of his experience.

For the dark velvet hood that matched the velvet frock was trimmed with dark fur, and against it Beauty's curls made an aureole round her face. She had not even a suspicion of rouge in her cheeks, and she was rather white than red, but her soft little mouth had colour enough, and the blue eyes and tragic brows, that were naturally darker than her hair, needed no pencil off the stage. She entered with the little rush and flurry of her kind, to whom even a sitting-room door is an "entrance" or an "exit"; but before they had reached each other her usual affectation had somehow died down, and she stood absolutely silent before

him and afraid to look up at the broad, hard face that she knew was bent so intently upon her.

"I hope you are not very tired. You had a great triumph!" he said.

"I believe I'm half asleep still," said Beauty, with an effort to recover her self-assurance. "I shall be awfully glad to get out into the air — it will wake me up!"

"I suppose you haven't had time to read all the papers yet?"

"My maid brought me a few notices — very good, weren't they? Oh, I should think it was sure to run!"

"Certain — you'll be going strong this time next two years, I should think."

"Gracious! I hope not. You get so sick of a part. I just loathed the 'Cannibal Lover,' you know."

"The public didn't! Are you warmly wrapped up? The car is closed, of course, but it's very cold." He took hold of the loose coat under excuse of fastening it for her, and touched her warm, round chin with his large hands. The girl nearly shrieked — she could not herself have told why — and choked it back with a fierce spasm of anger at herself. Was she gone mad — she, Beauty Darling, who had laughed with insolence in men's faces, and been as cool as any of the Satyr girls at playing an admirer? And yet this red-haired, rather brutal man had the power to make her flinch and cry out with fear at his first touch — not because he was the Duke of Leicestershire, but from some unknown, ominous fate that seemed threatening her in him.

She must have drawn back instinctively, and he fancied himself too abrupt in his advances, for he did

not, as she feared, attempt any further familiarity beyond the strong pressure of his fingers on her arm as he helped her into the car. She saw the chauffeur's sidelong glance at her, even as she took her place, and Leicestershire tucked the fur rug over her knees and round her feet.

"Where are we going?" she asked, trying to chatter as usual. "You know I haven't an idea! I'm leaving it all to you — I'm only coming for the fun of the expedition!"

"That's what I wanted," he responded coolly. "You leave it all to me! We're going to lunch at Charvonard's, and then I want to buy some furs as a present for a little friend of mine!"

He need not have looked round at her with his hard, half-proprietary glance, to explain away the thin pretence of his offer. She knew that she was herself the little friend quite as well as he did, and somehow there was none of that complacency and pleasurable excitement that a girl should feel who is promised the desire of her heart at the moment.

"I adore furs!" said Beauty, which was quite true; but had she been Cherry Bough or Mona Morley, the price she was to pay for them would hardly have entered into her thoughts, save as a rather pleasurable detail.

"This is just the right weather to choose them, isn't it?" he said. "A girl looks so awfully well in furs, particularly in the snow."

"I shan't eat any lunch; I shall be thinking so much about the shops to come after!" said Beauty, nestling her chin into her despised mink collar, and looking up under her lashes in a fashion she had learned by

stage habit. He returned the glance with so much interest that she was frightened again. "I love seeing pretty things," she added hastily, "oh! even if I'm not buying anything myself."

"I won't take you to the shops if you don't do credit to my luncheon," said Leicestershire, with a smile that made her feeble disguise of the situation of no value.

He had ordered luncheon at Charvonard's, as she found, making it evident that, despite his deference to her tire, he was pretty sure that he should not be companionless at the famous restaurant. Beauty had enjoyed the drive from Chelsea to Piccadilly; the snow lay white and hardly begrimed as yet, even in the roadway, for there had been a fresh fall in the night. It hung upon the branches of the stripped trees, and the cold sunshine glittered on the white world without warming it. The motor bowled along with cautious smoothness, hardly jarring even amongst the ruts of snow, and Beauty nestled back in her corner, enjoying the luxury and the warmth and the sense of quick motion. It was such a pretty London that she looked at to-day, and such a clear, dazzling atmosphere! Perhaps the contrast of some phases of the life she had lived made her appreciate it all the more, though it was in her nature to love the downy side of life, and ease and pleasant things. There was a wide gulf between the dark days at New Cross and the present moment, at any rate.

When she alighted at the restaurant the cold had delicately flushed her face, even in the closed motor. Beauty had a skin that never became unbecomingly red, and her nose never suffered from an east wind as

many girls' did; but by an instinct of genius she had put neither rouge nor paint on her face to-day, and Nature rewarded her by stinging the young blood into her soft cheeks. As the heavy glass door swung apart the porter looked with open interest at the two incoming figures, for the Duke was well known at Charvonard's, and the "lady" he was bringing to lunch was worth looking at.

"Who is she?" said the officials among themselves, for such gossip flies fast. Somebody recognized her in the first five minutes, and comment was general. "It's that girl from Allonby's — Beauty Darling. She's worth looking at!" was the general verdict.

She was worth looking at. The glowing face in the frame of the hood was a dainty contrast to Leicestershire, big and heavy and red-haired, but with a certain stamp of the English sportsman about him. He had not ordered a private room — perhaps he was not sure enough of his position as yet! — but their table was in a secluded corner, and only the two assiduous waiters passed and repassed on needless errands to look at the Duke's new girl. At the beginning of luncheon M. Charvonard himself brought the wine-list, and bowed to the lady.

"I 'ope everyzing to your liking, your Graze!" he said, and his smile was as smooth as the soubise sauce.

"I am sure it will be!" said Leicestershire good-humouredly. "Will you drink champagne, Miss Darling? You've a long afternoon's shopping before you."

"Zen I am sure ze young lady need it!" Charvon-

ard rubbed his plump hands, and his sentimental French eyes rested with veiled adoration on the blue eyes and gilded curls and ripe cheeks of the "Miracle Anglais!"

"Yes, thanks — it's the only wine I like!" said Beauty ingenuously.

The Duke laughed, and ordered a bottle of Bollinger, and M. Charvonard laughed and went away to see that it was ready — a mere farce, just as the wine-list had been, since it had been ordered when the luncheon was booked, and put on the ice precisely long enough. But Beauty enjoyed the sparkle and the chill of it, and did not trouble to guess that its effect upon her had been settled beforehand. She had never fallen into the habit of drinking spirits, as many of the girls at the Satyr did, because she had been usually hard pressed for money, and later on Edgar Allonby had kept a steady hand over her in this respect. Therefore the wine was really a stimulant, and reassured her uneasiness, though without going to her head. Those shuddering instincts that had kept her on the alert when they started were somewhat allayed, and when Leicestershire's knee touched hers during luncheon she did not draw away as she had done before, on impulse. A little later his broad hand rested on her own for a minute under the sheltering table, but she did not flinch, though a curious numbness passed through her limbs. Perhaps it was that that kept her so still, as if all power of motion had gone from her.

Beauty Darling was by no means a sensualist. She was far more vain than passionate, and indeed old Sir Everton Toff once cynically observed that the most

acceptable offer a man could make her was not his heart so much as a mirror! She was voracious for men's admiration, and she craved their petting; the inevitable outcome of such tributes from masculine nature she accepted as necessary, but did not desire herself. Her only sensuous experience had been when, as a child, Trevor Guy's hands had played on her nerves and awakened her capacity for physical pleasure, which, however, had never been so keen since. Once, years afterwards, it chanced that Noble was wearing a suit of heather tweed, such as Guy had been wont to affect, and the musky, oily scent about it had given Beauty a curious thrill, almost a faint reflection of her former vague desires. But Noble certainly could not have satisfied them, being unpossessed of the unholy power that lay in Guy's Satanic hands. Beauty had, on the contrary, been really fond of George Mannering, and their experience was merely the outcome of mutual adolescence; for Edgar Allonby she had had a liking based on material advantages to be gained from the connexion with him. Even Cuthbert Noble had only attracted her through the glamour of his good looks and a certain superiority in class and position to her own. Now, with Hughie Leicestershire, she was more repelled than acquiescent, and though the wine at luncheon had brought back her confidence she was rather glad that there would be no chance of any further demonstration in the motor between the restaurant and the great fur store where they were going.

As they came out of Charvonard's it chanced that a gentleman was passing on foot. He raised his hat to the Duke, leered at Beauty, and replaced the hat a

trifle on one side at the angle supposed to be affected by King Edward the Seventh.

"There's old Toff!" said Leicestershire.

"Everton Toffy!" laughed Beauty. "He was awfully sweet on a girl at Allonby's named Gertie Grierson years ago when I was in the 'Queen of Hearts' as a kid."

"Was he?" said the Duke. He was not above gossip, and, besides, of what else are you to talk to a star of Musical Comedy save the little scandals of her world?

"Oh, yes; he used to come behind and sit in her dressing-room night after night. He always took her to Prince's. I used to see them get into his carriage and wonder if anyone would ever take me to Prince's!"

"You must have been to Prince's and all the other supper-places often enough since then!"— Leicestershire looked round at her with bold admiration as the motor rolled on again.

"I've had an awfully good time on the whole."

"It's nothing to what you are going to have!"

"How do you know?"

"Because I want to give it to you!"—

There was no time for more just then, for they had reached their destination. Beauty almost gasped for pleasure as they went up the deep carpeted stairs and found themselves in the great showrooms amongst such furs as surely no girl's heart could resist. The Duke was known here also — it almost seemed as if they were expecting him. One ravishing set after another was brought out and with quiet deference tried on over Beauty's velvet gown, proving more and

more irresistible as a set-off to her eager face. There was no longer any pretence of the "present" being for another friend; the assistants knew all about it, Leicestershire did not deny that he knew all about it, Beauty herself accepted the position of knowing all about it. She only sighed when she relinquished pointed fox for ermine and ermine for seal, coming out of the shop finally with a new set of sables flung over and around her shoulders and her hands in a big muff dripping with tails and paws of the helpless, slaughtered animals. No savage could have decked his squaw in more barbaric fashion than this very civilized nobleman did the little Musical Comedy girl whom he was wooing with quite as elementary a purpose.

"Are they *really* for me? You know it's too awfully sweet of you!" she remembered to say as she found herself once more in the motor, with her spoils actually upon her, for he had carelessly suggested carrying them straight off. At least there was little moral cowardice about Leicestershire. He did not, as a more cautious man might have done, keep in the background and allow Beauty to act as if she were buying for herself. That thin pretence might have deceived nobody, but it would have thrown a veil of decency over the proceedings. Nor had he suggested that she should choose them without his being present, and that his part in the transaction should be confined to writing the cheque. He was a marked man whatever he did in London, and he knew that perfectly well when he appeared with Beauty Darling of Allonby's in the fur store and chose and paid for the sables for her. This attitude was illustrative of his character; and the

moralist can call it a sort of coarse courage or shamelessness, according to his creed.

He did not even tell Beauty that she was a little hypocrite for asking her needless questions as to the ownership of the sables, though his own fearless mental attitude would have entitled him to do so. He assured her that he was only too pleased to be allowed to give her something that she liked, and when she admitted that she "simply loved" furs and couldn't afford them, he said, "What a shame!" Of course any girl as pretty as Beauty Darling ought to have everything she wanted.

"You know," said Beauty with a sigh, "I shouldn't be so tempted only I am so awfully hard up just now — really stony!"

"Tell me about it," said Leicestershire kindly — at least the words sounded very kind to Beauty's harassed memory of her debts.

"Well; I'm a little dipped — not very much, you know — a mere trifle to *you,* but it means an awful lot to me! I don't know how I'm ever going to get straight. I'm only getting thirty pounds a week, and I shan't get any more for a year."

"Allonby must be a screw! You are worth far more to him."

"I don't know — most girls get only thirty pounds for lead the first year," said Beauty honestly. "But somehow it's so much more expensive being a leading lady."

"How much are you in debt? You don't mind my asking you, do you?"

"No; I'm not very much in, really. It's about fifty

pounds. But what worries me is that I can't see how I'm to make it less."

"Is that all?" he interrupted, laughing, and bringing out a pocket-book he began selecting some crisp bank-notes. "Look here; you must let me put that right for you — it's nothing —'pon my word I should only lose it at cards. Now do — there's a good little girl. I can't bear to think of your worryin'."

"I've lain awake at nights over it," confessed Beauty, with her blue eyes quite tragic. "But I can't really take this — it isn't as if we were old friends even!" (The morality of Musical Comedy has its peculiar code.)

"But we're going to be; yes, now, just as a promise that you'll be pally." He thrust the crisp notes into the new muff, and took the opportunity to crush the little hand in his own. Beauty's fingers closed over the money half-reluctantly, half-eagerly. She was really more tempted than he could conceive from a fair acquaintance with girls of her class, for the debt had weighed on her in exact proportion to her early training. Sometimes our very virtues are our own undoing. Mrs. Darling's rigid tenets made it an impossibility for her foster-daughter to go easily along a road strewn with unpaid bills, as Folly Bird or Mrs. Simpson would have done.

The short day was beginning to close in, and the car had turned discreetly out of Piccadilly and was running down to the Embankment. Leicestershire's time had come, for his gifts had been paid as a tribute beforehand. He said "Beauty!" in a quick short whisper, and the hand he had slipped into the big

muff tightened again over hers. Then as the traffic of St. James's Street fell behind he pulled the girl towards him without further parley and kissed her, his lips stinging the cold softness of her face. She did not resist this time: the furs held her in a more irresistible clasp than he did — but her heart began to beat again in a miserable terror.

"Are you going to let me give you a good time?" he said, and there was all the contract and the bargain in the few words.

"Yes, if you want to!" said Beauty Darling with a faint sigh.

He held her head back, to look with gloating eyes at the thing that he was buying — just as Beauty might look at her furs! — and it seemed that he was satisfied. "We'll find a dear little flat for you, shall we?" he said, for he was not strikingly original. "And everything that little girls like — what?" Beauty put her lips up with a tame knowledge that she must make some deposit payment for this, and felt his hard, wind-bitten cheek beneath her soft lips. He was a clean-shaven man, and his face was harsh and rough to touch, but she almost preferred it to the pressure of his mouth on hers, to which she had of course to respond.

"How damned pretty you are!" he said with a sudden fierceness. "Mustn't I say that? What are you pulling away for?"

The terror had come over her again irresistibly, making her want to start up and spring out of the car, to get away from him, to save herself at this last moment while there was yet time, she hardly knew from what. But she was in the grip of a stronger

will than her own, dominated by a personality that hypnotized her unconsciously to herself. The cry died in her throat — she did not utter that instinctive protest, and the moment passed. . . .

Sir Everton Toff, turning into White's that afternoon about the same hour, found two or three men of his own calibre in the card-room, and between the rubbers was able to inform them that Hughie Leicestershire was runnin' Beauty Darling. The statement was based on a mere encounter outside Charvonard's, but it was a prophetic truth.

CHAPTER XIV

THE landaulette drew up at Percy Edwards's, and the chauffeur got out of the driving seat to open the door for his mistress. She emerged thickly veiled, and paused a minute to give the servant some instruction before crossing the Piccadilly pavement and entering the jeweller's, allowing the passing public to see that she was a small lady in a long tan coat whose obvious cost was duly repeated in the very smart hat on her head; but it was only, perhaps, one passing pedestrian who was not to be put off by her hidden face, and recognized Miss Beauty Darling of Allonby's by some familiarity of outline. If it had not been for the veil several would have turned round.

The March wind was bitterly cold. Beauty shivered, and drew her sables closer round her throat as she threaded her way through the crossing stream of people. Piccadilly was fairly crowded at twelve o'clock in March, though it was still Lent. While she paused, a gentleman and lady coming out of the shop she was going to enter nearly crossed her path; but turning to the right, went on towards the Corner, walking briskly and talking busily — at least the man was so engaged in conversation that he did not look at the actress, and the girl was listening with perfect attention if she did not speak. Though they had not apparently recognized her, Beauty knew one of them at least, for it was Captain Cuthbert Noble,

and the lady with him was no doubt Lady Jane, *née* Lawless, whose marriage to the good-looking soldier had flooded the illustrated papers last summer, and almost pushed a Musical Comedy girl on to the last page.

Beauty's hand trembled a little as she laid it on the handle of the door and entered the shop. For almost the first time in her life it had come upon her that she was not an acquaintance to be desired by every single person in the universe, a lady to whom all London clamoured to be introduced — for Beauty's universe was London, sometimes extended for a brief while to Paris or Monte Carlo. She was certain that Noble had not recognized her; and yet a haunting question forced itself upon her mind as to whether he would have stopped to speak to her if he had done so. There was no exact reason why he should, even though he might have raised his hat and greeted her as he passed; indeed, the fact that he and his wife were obviously going somewhere with a purpose, and not simply out for a saunter, made it improbable. Yet — would he have introduced her to the girl he had married? Would he have introduced her to Lady Jane Lawless anyhow, whether he had married her or no? (Beauty knew Lady Jane's brothers very intimately, but they had never asked her to meet any lady, save her own theatrical associates) — would he have made her known to a single one of his female relations or friends? If she had married him herself he must have done so, either before or after the wedding. But it would have taken the marriage tie to effect such an alteration in their intimacy. She wished for one surprising moment of savagery that

she had become engaged to him herself, if only for a time, to force him to cross the Rubicon.

It was really the first time that the subtleties of her position had been brought home to Beauty Darling, or perhaps the first time that she had deigned to think of them at all. The spoiled child of the public, and the fêted queen of a certain type of entertainment, had no cause or inclination to consider whether she would be accepted in the sanctuary of women's houses whose men-kind would throw up their invitations for one from herself. Yet it dawned upon her dimly that dowdy and dull as it might be to take tea with Lady Bannishmann or old Mrs. Noble, it was a thing that she was never likely to be asked to do — it had the sanctity of the unattainable. Beauty spoke quite correctly — with a slight twanging of the vowels in her higher tones — she wrote a very good hand, and her spelling did credit to the old Foundation at Wandlebridge. The rest of her education stopped at fourteen, but she was not more glaringly ignorant than many well-known women, and she had learned to play golf and bridge, though rather indifferently. She had actually lunched at a restaurant or so with smart parties whose host or hostess wanted a notoriety to amuse their own friends, and had sat next to Cabinet Ministers and met women of another world on an equality for the time being. But they were mostly married women — not girls; and though they sometimes asked her out again to other like lunch parties, they never admitted her on the footing of a visitor to their houses. A very clever conjuror, or a man with a new crank, might have been included on the same terms. If you are sufficiently advertised in

London you can know most people — within certain limits; but there will remain a certain circle that you cannot know unless you possess the master-key of birth and breeding, and there will remain a certain intimacy that you can never attain even within the most elastic phase of society. Beauty had not been "taken up," of course, while she was still a chorus girl, and as she had slowly come to the front she had been somewhat hampered by a lack of introductions. When she had burst into the full glare of success she had been further overshadowed by her relations with the Duke of Leicestershire, for though it was quite possible to ignore them, the notoriety of the affair would flavour the atmosphere. It had not mattered to Beauty herself at all. She was quite satisfied to know that she could draw men after her, away from the women who would not have received her, and she thought her position infinitely preferable to theirs. It was only in the moment of meeting Noble, when he had consoled himself and gone back to his own world for a wife, that she suddenly felt the doors of his house closed in her face and resented it all the more because she had never considered it possible. It was with her tragic eyebrows drawn into a frown and a sullen touch upon her fair face that she entered the jeweller's and went up to the counter. She wanted the clasp of a diamond bracelet mended, and the bracelet having come from the famous house in Piccadilly she had brought it back to them. Beauty loved her diamonds. She touched the stones lovingly with her small fingers, almost as if they were living things, and the assistant, leaning flatteringly over the counter (for he knew her by sight), pointed out a

new pendant to her notice whose design he was sure she would admire!

"Yes, it's perfectly *lovely!*" said Beauty, with a hushed rapture in her voice that would certainly not have been there for any other work of art. "I only wish I could have it — a hundred and thirty guineas, did you say?"

"It is well worth the money, madam. The stones are of the first quality, and there is not another like it in London. Look at the design!"

Beauty sighed and put down the ornament reluctantly. She was afraid she could not hope to get it out of Hughie, and he was so tiresome in objecting to other men giving her the things that he would not. Elizabeth Pytchley had gauged the situation correctly when she said that Leicestershire played the bulldog warning off the curs. The discontent in Beauty's face had deepened when she left the shop again and emerged into the bright sunshine and cutting wind of March Piccadilly.

It was to be a morning of encounters. As Beauty came out of the left-hand door of the double shop a gentleman emerged from the right-hand door, passed her, and walked down Piccadilly in the same direction that the Nobles had taken. He had not looked at her, any more than Captain Noble had done, and in any case she had dropped her veil again; but she stood for a minute fingering the door-handle with feverish hands, while her memory turned dizzily to a steep descent of years, and went down, down, to a little girl in an apple-tree, and a small suburban cottage. . . . Those high, stooping shoulders, as though he still carried an artist's pack upon them!

That evil face, darkened still more with the shadow of intervening years ill-spent! That large hand with the delicate fingers that wrought miracles of sense! — she had seen it rest a moment on the frame of the door as he closed it, and could have shrieked aloud in the shock of her tingling nerves. . . . The passers-by only saw a tall, elderly man, walking rather swiftly along the pavement into distance, recognized perhaps by one or two gentlemen as the degraded member of a well-known family. But after ten years clear of his presence, Beauty Darling shrank as if it were only last night that she had fled from Trevor Guy. What ominous fate had brought him near her now, in the stress of her overwrought mind and body? She could almost have thought it an obsession, an hallucination, but for the physical reality of her laboured breath.

Her motor had been forced to move into the middle of the road instead of waiting at the kerb, to make way for other traffic. The chauffeur saw her at once, however, and raising his hand, waited for an opportunity to cut the line and reach the pavement again. As Beauty stood on the kerb she looked up and saw a motor-omnibus coming up Piccadilly and the next instant it had stopped opposite her in a block. She was thinking of the pendant for the moment, worrying almost feverishly to feel it on her white neck — and then her reluctant mind turned to Trevor Guy — so that her glance at the bus was mechanical. The next instant it had awakened to consciousness of two well-known faces, for the man and the woman sitting on the back seat were Michael Phayre and Meta Chumleigh.

They did not see her any more than the Nobles or Guy; but either Beauty's senses were sharpened today, or something in the proximity of the two figures explained itself. They were laughing and talking, and even at a distance Beauty could more than suspect the smile in Michael's blue eyes. He had often looked at her like that in the kindness of his great heart, though had she been able to see him closer just now she might have found something more in his face than she had ever brought there. The suspicion that was certainty, however, was enough to send a wave of such passionate resentment over her that it left her trembling. She felt as she looked at the two that she had lost Michael just at the moment when she most needed him, and that a mysterious dread lying dormant in her heart had only been endurable because she knew subconsciously that he was still to be relied upon. In the sudden sense of loss of him she almost shrieked again, and the surge of her emotions frightened herself. This other girl, who had posed as her friend, had stolen him; he was no longer there, in the background of her life, the one stable thing left her to lean on in trouble. She would be the second in his life now, instead of having the first right to make demands upon him. For though Beauty had never loved Michael Phayre, and did not love him now, she had been quite ready to grasp and lay hold on the true affection he gave her and the self-sacrifice that her service entailed. Such liking as she had given him had been entirely selfish, and he had accepted it with a patience that was almost divine, as the best that she had to offer as yet.—

The omnibus moving on freed her own motor, which

came over to the pavement, and the girl said "Home!" to the chauffeur in a queer, choked voice, and getting into the welcome dusk of the carriage, buried her face in her hands and sobbed recklessly. It was well that she had put on that long thick veil, for her eyelids were swollen and stained by the time she reached her own flat, and her face disfigured by her unaffected crying. She felt so sorry for herself! Michael had deserted her just when he should have stood by her and helped her through, and she reproached him bitterly in her thoughts, making no note of the years of patient friendship which should have brought him release from obligation, to ask at least for a little love and happiness on his own account.

How quietly contented they had looked! How mean and unfair it seemed to Beauty Darling that Meta should have valued and accepted the thing that she herself would have refused! For she still shuddered to think of the poverty and struggle that life with Michael would have meant years ago, and even the dubious outlook of it to-day, compared to the luxury of her own surroundings when she reached home. It was a very pretty flat, and it satisfied all Beauty's material aspirations. She flung aside her furs for Janet to collect and take charge of, and sat down to a dainty lunch which somehow she could hardly eat.

"You've been crying again!" said the maid brusquely, when she saw her. "If you go on like this you'll be a rag to-night. It's a mercy your eyes soon recover. . . ."

"I can't help it!" said Beauty, with an hysterical sob. "I've been so upset, Janet — I've seen Mr. Phayre with that girl Meta Chumleigh!" — Beauty had

never learned to keep anything that affected her from her maid (unless it were something that she was afraid Janet might censure), who treated her as such natures invariably treat those weaker than themselves, partly as an equal, partly still as a valued asset, and to be guarded as such.

"Well?"

"I believe he is going to marry her!"

"The best thing he can do, I'm sure!" said Janet sharply. "And I hope they'll keep themselves to themselves and not be overrunning us here. You haven't been crying over *that,* surely!"

"I think it's a damned shame that they haven't told me!"

"They'll tell you fast enough — when they want a wedding-present. Do eat your lunch, and don't go drinking that whisky and soda till you've done. You'll make yourself worse."

But Beauty could not eat, though Janet, really worried, tried to feed her with sandwiches of *foie gras* and her favourite sweets. Finally she made her a cup of strong beef-tea, and having bathed her eyes and undressed her, made her lie down on her bed, and watched her fall into an uneasy sleep — a sleep in which she moaned and cried out sometimes.

"I suppose it *is* true — though I won't let her believe it yet awhile," said Janet, with her shrewd eyes on the heaving breast. "I wonder what we are to do! — and how he will take it. . . ."

Beauty woke about five o'clock, somewhat rested, and the maid advised her going into the drawing-room for tea, though she would rather have lain still and taken more stimulant if it had been given to her.

Janet had her reasons, however, and would administer neither drugs nor alcohol. She arranged the loose curls artistically, to soften the strained, white face that showed sharper angles to-day, and dressed Beauty in a white tea-gown, a garment whose silk and chiffon made her look extraordinarily young and childish. There was no colour in her face, but the tear-stains were gone, and if her eyes were heavy they were no less beautiful. The tragic touch had reached its perfection in her little face as she walked languidly into the drawing-room and caught sight of herself in a long mirror facing the door, pausing from habit to see how she looked, for to Beauty Darling half the world was herself and the other half the people who saw her. A minute later Janet was startled by a cry that summoned her to follow quickly.

"Janet! Janet! Come here! Come here. Where did it come from? Who put it here?"

The maid ran into the room in real haste, to find her mistress gazing with horrified eyes at a picture hanging on the wall over Beauty's own favourite couch. It was so placed that the electric light fell full upon it, though the day was drawing in. Beauty had not seen it when she entered, until she turned on the switch to light the mirror.

"Why, that came this morning, while you were out," Janet explained. "I had a message from the Duke himself that it was to be hung there at once — as a surprise for you. My! but it is like you, isn't it?"

It was the original picture for which Beauty had sat years ago to Trevor Guy, the famous "Spring" bought by a big picture-dealer, from which many re-

productions had been made. How Leicestershire had become possessed of it Beauty did not know; he must have paid a considerable sum to induce the dealer to part with it. But it seemed that Fate, with a grimace, had brought it up out of the shadows of the past to thrust it upon Beauty Darling at a moment when she was most vulnerable. Coming after the encounter with Guy himself in Piccadilly there was something that seemed supernatural about it, as if the curse of his personality had fallen upon her again, precursing disaster. She stood with her body thrust a little forward, and her hands gripped behind her as always in moments of distress, peering into the representation of her own child-face with a ghastly intentness. Janet looked from one to the other curiously.

"*Was* it painted from you?" she said, sharply curious. "You must have been a kid."

The round, beautiful face framed in the apple blossoms looked out at the Beauty Darling of to-day with unflinching, indifferent blue eyes. There was hardly any character in it, for there was no experience; but the shadowy possibility of tragedy in the moulding of the brows had received a terrible realization in the face of the girl looking at it with such visible repugnance and horror. She did not answer Janet's question. She did not even hear it. Out of the past it seemed to her that Trevor Guy's infinitely evil face was thrust closer to hers than the picture — closer than it had been in Piccadilly — and that his magical hands were stroking her knees as she sat in the apple-tree, giving her her first sexual sensation, the most vivid physical pleasure she had ever known. . . .

"Hark! there's the bell!" said Janet suddenly, seizing her roughly by the shoulder and shaking her. "Pull yourself together! The Duke's in town, I suppose, and if this is he you can't look like that — you mustn't let him see you like that!"

Words failed her to describe the curious effect that Beauty Darling's expression and attitude were having even on herself, but she felt the urgent necessity of breaking the tension. With the whole force of her will she pulled the younger, slighter girl round, and almost threw her on the couch, banking the cushions behind her, and arranging the splendid silk folds of her gown before she rushed out of the room to find out if her prognostication as to the visitor were true. Beauty lay where she had been put, half raised on her pillows, her blue eyes gazing out of her wonderful white face like two great jewels, and over her head the mocking, meretricious picture of that other Beauty Darling called "Spring."

She had not moved when a familiar step sounded in the passage outside, and Leicestershire's voice said, "May I come in?"

He came in, without waiting for permission — a tall, strong man with a face bitten by wind and weather in the hunting county of England, and keen eyes that went at once to the exquisite figure on the couch under the lamplight — the figure that made the centre of his picture as he entered, the girl who belonged to him more abjectly than if she had borne his name and gone her own way, as his wife did.

"Well, darlin' baby, how are you?" he said, bending over Beauty, and taking her face in his hard, cold

hands. "It's a nippin' wind to-day. Been out?"

"Yes," she said breathlessly, nestling her soft head in his breast, for his emphatic presence was something at least to cling to in the nightmare of strange fears that was gradually closing in on her. "I didn't know you were in town, Hughie."

"Knew I should come, eh? After your letter!"

"I — wanted to see you — I felt I must!" Her throat was dry, and she found she could barely speak now that it came to facing her fear. She forgot to make even a conventional apology for bringing him to town — indeed, she hardly thought of it, the necessity seemed so great to her. Leicestershire sat down by the tea-table and helped himself, domestically, as if not very much concerned with her urgency.

"What's the matter, old pet?"

She did not answer the question, save by another.

"Hughie, where did you get that picture?" raising her hand to point above her head.

"Bought it because it was you. I suppose it *is* you? Where did you know that rotten bounder, Guy?"

"He took a room in the cottage where I was living with my foster-mother, and painted the neighbourhood." Beauty rather liked the reference to her "foster"-mother, which seemed to balance the humbleness of the cottage. But she did not want to go into the question of Trevor Guy.

"Have you ever seen him since?" The bulldog growled a warning in the bully's voice.

"No — never." She dared not add "Thank God!" nor yet mention that glimpse to-day, which he might

not have believed had been so much the sport of chance.

"Well — he's not fit for any woman to know." Had she been finer of hearing she might have added to herself "Even such as you," but Beauty was not very intuitive, fortunately for her own feelings.

"I don't care much for the picture anyway," she said, after a minute. "It's a beastly thing! I shall have it taken down."

"No, you won't!" he retorted, showing his teeth in a broad smile, so that he looked like a good-tempered dog — a bulldog none the less. "You'll jolly well leave it there, because I like it."

"But I don't like it!" said Beauty, in a burst of pettishness. She was bound to assert herself for once, though as a rule it was Hugh who ruled the roost. She did not intend to have it so — she intended to be as imperious during her reign as Barbara Sinclair or Cherry Bough to their respective protectors. But Beauty lacked the instinct of self-preservation as much as that of commerce. She might cry like a spoilt child — she could never rule like an autocrat. It was a proof of this that now Folly Bird was Lady Hermal, and Mona Morley engaged to a young Guardsman, while even Barbara Sinclair had married Jack Simpson years ago; but all that Beauty had accomplished was to be the mistress of a man who was notoriously unfaithful to his women. Leicestershire did not even pretend to give in to all her whims, but broke her to his will as carelessly as if the tie between them had been final. A man will generally make concessions to his mistress, at least in the earlier days of their connec-

tion, to keep her with him; but Leicestershire had been astute enough to find out very early in the game that he held the winning cards of a stronger will and determination. In the present case he meant the picture to remain where it was, and he did not trouble himself for the unreasoning repugnance in Beauty's restless eyes, or even her feeble stand against it.

"But, Hughie, I can't bear the thing — it worries me just now. I shan't come into this room if it stays. Oh, do take it down and turn it with its face to the wall!" She put her hand childishly over her face and almost whimpered.

"Don't be a little fool!" said Leicestershire good-humouredly. "What's come over you?" He sat down beside her on the couch, making room for his big person by the simple process of pushing her little body aside, and took her hands away. "What's all this rot?" he said, leaning forward to look deep into her eyes. "What was your letter about?"

"I tried to tell you. . . ."

"I only read half of it. My dear child, you can't expect me to wade through all that nonsense. I couldn't make head or tail of it. Come! tell us straight out — what is the matter?"

The laces rose and fell on the girl's breast in a sigh that was half a sob, and seemed to break from her body without her will. It was the whirlpool of life catching her in its current and spinning her round and round like an eddying straw. "I'm so afraid, Hughie!" she panted. "I'm almost sure — I can't go on like this!" Her voice rose almost shrilly, and her eyes glazed.

"Are you afraid you are going to have a kid?" said

Leicestershire slowly. He always made plain statements, and he saw no horror in the thing, tiresome though it might be, such as paralysed the words on Beauty's lips. "That's a bit of a bore. But I expect you're all wrong — you've worked yourself up to this."

"Oh, yes, I hope so! You think it's not possible, don't you? You think I've fancied it?" She clung to his hard hands as if they were a literal rescue.

"Well, it's not impossible," said Leicestershire practically. "Still, it's very likely to be a mistake. Have you seen a doctor?"

"No — I didn't dare — I didn't want to know."

"Oh, come, that's rot again. You must know, one way or the other. You'd better send for a doctor and find out. It will be a weight off your mind if he tells you it isn't."

"But if it is? . . ."

He felt the little hands holding his own tremble, and misinterpreted the cause. To his mind Beauty was very naturally afraid of bringing a nameless child into the world who might be abandoned by him and its maintenance cast on her at some future time. Girls in her position had to look out for themselves, and she was a bit hysterical. But what he did not understand was the unbalanced horror of childbirth that had always possessed Beauty's mind. Perhaps if she had had a guarded girlhood that had ended in matrimony, to bear children might have come as the natural course of things, but she had been associated from the first with the warning held up to all girls of her class of "getting caught"; and then had come the practical illustration of Folly Bird, and the constant talk about

such things that went on amongst other girls. Moreover, some heritage from her own birth may have darkened her mind from the mother who must in her turn have dreaded the coming of the child she had desperately abandoned. The unknown pangs, the ill-concealed shame of her position, the bringing forth of some bastard thing never to be quite openly acknowledged, made pregnancy the one violent emotion of Beauty Darling's nature, and that emotion was one of ungovernable fear.

"But if it is? . . ." she said, and could not finish her sentence.

"Well, if it is you'll have to go abroad, little woman, or into the country for a time, and be reported as 'resting.' Others girls do it pretty often — what?"

"There's the new piece coming on in January — I couldn't be out of that," she said wildly, fighting every inch of ground for release from the inevitable fate that seemed to be closing in on her, she hardly knew how.

"You'd have to if it were too near. When do you expect —"

"I don't know — I know nothing. It isn't certain."

"Well, you'd probably be able to play for a time, and then say you had broken down. You can go on till it begins to show, y'know, and then I'll take you away and see that it's as easy as possible for you."

"Oh, Hughie, I can't!" The palms of her hands were moist, and the great blue of her eyes darkened to black.

"Don't be in such a funk, Beauty. Buck up! — you're not going to die of it. You're healthy enough.

And look here, I'll give you my word to see that the kid is all right." It seemed a miracle, but his face softened. There was something that was almost a startling contrast between the two — the woman's intolerable shrinking, the shadow of a sentiment in the man's complaisance. "I won't back out of my share of the responsibility," he said, with all the robust acceptance of his race.

"It's not that, I tell you!"— The girl half rose from her recumbent position, and thrust her hands out as if warding off a blow. "I won't have it — I won't! Let me go to Leyman and get rid of it."

"Leyman?"

"Yes — he's in Harold Street. Heaps of girls go. There's no fuss and no bother. He will get rid of it for me."

Had Beauty been Folly Bird or Cherry Bough she would never have asked permission. She would have gone to Leyman first, and if it had been necessary to confess, would have done so afterwards, taking it for granted that the father of an undesired child would be thankful for its destruction. But again, Beauty lacked the initiative and the nerve to act for herself; she wanted some one to assist her, almost to back her up. And to her extremity of despair she did not find in Leicestershire the acquiescence for which she looked.

"No!" he said at once, and the frown had come back to his eyes. "It won't do. You might get into some mess, and there would be a deuce of a row, and talk, and one would hardly be able to buy it off. No, if you have got into this condition you must face it out." Then seeing the incomprehensible fear in her face, he put it down to hysteria, and spoke soothingly.

"You might do yourself some injury, my pet, and I can't risk that. Better be natural, and have the child, rather than an illegal operation."

She looked into his face, her wits sharpened by her desperation. "Hughie! You can't *want* me to have a child! You don't seem to mind — you almost like it!"

There was the pause of her amazement, and then suddenly he caught her up in his arms with a flushed face above her at which she stared in still growing dread. "Well, if we do have a kid, it will be a new experience, damn it!" he said in a rough, choked voice. "You're too beautiful not to be a mother — you ought to have babies. If a man gave you half-a-dozen children he'd be excused!" He held her hard against his chest, his breath coming quickly and falling hot upon the curly head thrown back against his shoulder. The paternal instinct is no less dangerous than the maternal, and very much less to be calculated upon.

Beauty glanced at his eyes — the lawless eyes of elemental manhood, strong to impress its stamp and image upon a coming race — and there she read her doom. . . .

CHAPTER XV

A DRESS rehearsal of Musical Comedy frequently begins at two o'clock in the day and lasts until two o'clock the next morning. This, however, includes the relays of meals brought in by the Dressers, for nobody leaves the theatre to eat or sleep until the awful period is over, and it generally seems as if everything were so wrong at the last minute that the first night must be a fiasco — the limes are hopelessly mixed, and the theatre rings with the repetition of airs which will later on be popular with half London — those horribly familiar airs that seem to haunt a House during the run of a successful piece!

Beauty Darling was in the second year of her contract with Allonby when the "Gay Dogs" was taken off to make room for "The Transformagist," and was drawing forty pounds a week as salary. This, however, was much less than the well-known Comedians, for Sam Mackintosh had taken sixty pounds in the "Gay Dogs," and when he had a difference of opinion with Edgar Allonby and left he made room for Gideon St. Gotherd, who transferred his popular services from Nolly O'Donnovan (manager of the Satyr) to his rival's theatre, for which boon Allonby had to pay him a hundred pounds a week. St. Gotherd was at the very head of his profession in public favour, and was regarded as inimitable and a draw not only for the stalls but for the pit and gallery. His goggling eyes and monkey manners were the exaggerated

standard for a certain set of young men, who (it is to be prayed!) imitated him unconsciously. He was nearly as much in request as Beauty herself, even on photo day — which is a whole day given up to the Press photographers and those engaged by the Management, who swarm over the stage and stalls and erect long and longer ladders for their work, while for a space the air is full of flashlights and strange cries of "Now the group!" "Now the dresses!" which keep the cast busy forming and reforming. Photo day occurs before the dress rehearsal, and the whole cast is called, and make up sufficiently for photography. Beauty was taken from near and far, in her new part, posed as the central figure amongst the rest of the London Company, and taken in every conceivable position that could illustrate her stage character — swinging round in Gideon St. Gotherd's arms by a lucky snap, balanced on a ladder while a horrible sense of giddiness made her sick (she had not been well of late), and the rose-covered walls of her cottage seemed too flimsy to support her; or lying asleep in a particularly realistic bed which drew forth coarse comments from "Giddy Goat," always most facetious over the unmentionable.

"Don't be so filthy! Your mind's a sewer, Giddy!" said the girl with exasperated force at last, shaking off the last of his innuendoes with a flushed face. It was not by Beauty's choice that she was so closely associated in the new piece with Mr. St. Gotherd, but it was certainly to his own satisfaction. Years since he had felt and demonstrated an attraction towards Beauty as a little chorus girl, but circum-

stances had intervened, and the fulfilment of such beginnings she had at least escaped. Now the swing of the pendulum had caused their revolving fates to touch again, and Beauty was as usual the helpless sport of circumstances. She felt she loathed St. Gotherd with a repulsion intensified by the quickened life within her, for it seemed as if all her senses were awakened to unusual activity; but she lacked the initiative to avoid him.

There had been of late an increasing fancy for dangerous dances, movements of which were better suited to acrobats than mere girls trained to steps. At the Modern Music Hall Fannie Carlos — once Our Fannie of the Lilliput Troupe — was giving a special turn with her husband, who was a professional of some standing, and flung his own body about, or his wife's, as freely as a conjuror does his balls. Their Hangman's Dance was the talk of the hour, and all the lesser ballets at other Houses were copying them in a feebler degree. At the Satyr Mona Morley was nightly balanced on two men's shoulders while they revolved beneath her, and Gertie Grierson had had a fall at the Sovereignty. The new fashion was marked in the piece at Allonby's by Beauty Darling lying back in her dance with St. Gotherd until her hands met round his neck and he caught her under the knees, whirling the two of them round with a last effort, and by force of the movement keeping them in rotation until he could let go of her, and the girl swung them both by the clasp of her arms. If Beauty had not been a small woman St. Gotherd could not have balanced her in the movement which followed, for the

girl's body carried them gradually across the stage and off at the "O. P." side, where three or four men stopped their impetus.

It would have been strictly against Leicestershire's orders that Beauty should undertake this dance and practise it, if he had at all realized the risk in her present state of health; but as he knew no more of the play than she chose to tell him, it had not been actually forbidden by him. Hughes would have no one in to rehearsal, and to attempt to gain entrance to that holy of holies was to incur the wrath of ten larger men impact in his slight frame. Beauty was thankful for this, for she was afraid of refusing any exertion that another girl might have undertaken. Allonby would no doubt have been considerate, but the fear of the twitter of gossip in the theatre was as a war-drum in her ears.—

"Beauty Darling can't do the swings with Giddy Goat!"—"Well, we all know *why!*"—"Beauty Darling daren't risk a fall just now — my word! but that's evident enough!"—"Girls, did you see? They've cut the swings for Beauty Darling! *Had* to! She's in for it this time!"—

Even though she knew herself now that there was no escape, it seemed to bring the dreaded thing so near. She could cheat herself a little longer if she used her limbs and her body like other girls, regardless of what might follow. And supposing it did follow — supposing something happened — it might avert it after all! Deep down in her cowering heart the maddened hope existed that a slip or an untoward movement might do for her what Leyman of Harold Street was not to be allowed to do. She did not think

of the consequences to herself — she was past that; or perhaps she was not wise or far-sighted enough to know. Other girls had escaped, with little or no illness to speak of. Beauty saw only the chances of escape, and looked no farther.

The new piece, "The Transformagist," was an elaborate production, and had taken many weeks to rehearse owing to the illusions introduced into the second act. The Comedian, Jester, played the name-part, and possessed the uncomfortable power of turning people into animals, vegetables, or minerals, in full sight of the audience. This was done by the aid of looking-glasses; but to get the effect perfect had been a work of much labour, and even at the eleventh hour the wearied cast were put back and back again to rehearse the transformations, until the language of the lime-light man upon the occasion became a classic. The footlights, or "floats," had three coloured glasses to turn on — red, green, and white or yellow — which were worked from the back by switches, and of course the regular limes were controlled by the unfortunate being who occupied a confined space up in the flies — those platforms that run round three sides of the stage — and from which he cursed and was cursed. By five o'clock every one was jaded and full of nerves, and Sydney Hughes's voice dismissing the chorus came as the benediction of an angel:

"Tea is provided in the dressing-room — I shall want you, Miss Darling."

"Can't I go and have tea?" said Beauty, aghast. The progress of the play had been stopped for Jester to chase St. Gotherd round a rose-garden maze with a magic powder. As soon as the powder was sprinkled

over him he became a huge cauliflower in the middle of the stage, and the transformation was not yet successful. But Beauty did not see why she should be detained for this.

"Your legs show, dear boy — damn it; your legs show!" exploded Hughes, dancing up and down with his hands on the back of the seat in front of him, as he surveyed the failure from the stalls.

"Crawl a little more under that rose-tree," advised Jester, joining Beauty Darling in the wings. "Hot, isn't it, dear?" he said as he mopped his face. He had the sad expression of a clown in private life, and his mirth-provoking grin seemed always left upon the stage — it was certainly not on his face when he reached the wings. Beauty liked him; they had always been friends. "This running about sweats it off us!" he said, sitting down cross-legged by the side of the chair that some one had put for Beauty, and that Hughes had not yet ordered away. "Oh, look at old Giddy!"— for St. Gotherd in his zeal had tumbled backwards out of sight, and brought down a mass of rose garlands which half buried him. "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may, Giddy! You're in a worse spider's web than before."

Beauty broke into an hysterical giggle, and could not stop it even as she met Hughes's wrathful eyes. He was furious, and let fly at every one in general.

"Get up, you garden ass! — Damn it, don't pull the scenery down.— Miss Darling, I won't have that noise in the wings.— Mr. Jester, get to your right entrance to begin again. Damn it! I will have this right, if you have to stay here all the damned night!"

"Why can't I go and have tea?" said Beauty querulously. "I've nothing to do in this."

"I shall want you in a minute; you must wait. Mr. St. Gotherd, keep more down the stage — more *down* stage, do you hear? Do you hear? Damn it! do you *hear?*"

"Yes, I hear," said St. Gotherd, who was rather white, and looked nasty about the eyes. "I can't get farther down stage or I shall block Miss Darling's entrance."

"Well, block it then, and let her get out of the way! Damn it, dear boy, you must keep clear of the cauliflower as you vanish, or you'll be behind it for the rest of the scene. Now, Miss Darling — Miss Darling!"

The lead, Oscar Bennett, had come round to the wings with a cup of tea for Miss Darling, good-naturedly meaning to dodge the Stage-Manager's eye. Beauty had turned her head to thank him with real gratitude, and did not hear her cue. The next instant she was nearly drowned in a torrent of words.

"Miss Darling, will you attend? Take that tea away, Bennett.— Damn it! I won't have anybody eat or drink till this scene's right. Come down stage, Miss Darling — no, right down! Now, Mr. St. Gotherd, time that exit.— I'll keep you here till we ring up to-morrow if you don't attend. Damn it! not that way — come *round* the rose-bush. Stop the orchestra! Take it through again.— Now, Miss Darling!"— His voice rose to palpitating rage as he handled his cast and drove them like an unruly team.

"Do you want Miss Darling to break her neck by falling over me as she passes behind the rose-bush?"

demanded St. Gotherd heatedly. Tempers were wearing thin, and the cast was getting stale with repetition.

"I don't care where she goes behind the rose-bush. You may both fall together as long as the audience don't see you! — Damn it! where are those limes?"

"Come along," said St. Gotherd roughly, crushing Beauty into the scenery as he passed her. "Hughes would risk our lives to get us out of the way!" He leered into the girl's face, tried to kiss her with the sceneshifters grinning as an appreciative audience, and slipped off at the prompt side.

Beauty entered up stage, and came down to the cauliflower, singing. Her shriek at sight of it was in the part, but it sounded a trifle too natural.

"Don't make a tragedy of it, Miss Darling," said Hughes grimly. "This isn't Shakespeare! Yes, that's better. You can get past all right now, St. Gotherd?"

"Oh, I can injure myself and Miss Darling as well — if that's what you want!" retorted St. Gotherd, whose temper had gone.

"You must be able to pass without the audience seeing — *that* is what I want!" — Hughes's voice was deadly. He had never liked Beauty, and St. Gotherd's loose tongue irritated his nerves. He would keep them at it to pay them both. "Go back to that chase round the maze — Jester! come along — St. Gotherd! take it up from the line, 'I won't be a Spring Onion if I have to change —'"

"I'll give you beans!" shouted Jester, starting in pursuit, and the scene continued as before, with the

cauliflower illusion and St. Gotherd wriggling off the stage. Beauty sat in the wings sulkily and awaited her cue.

"It's like a pantomime!" she said.

She was very tired, mentally and physically, by seven o'clock, when the Company were allowed an hour off for dinner. Only her youth could have stood the strain, and a few more years would crack her voice and sharpen her face if it did not lead to champagne. She would have taken drugs now if she could have got them, but she needed Janet's help, and Janet was too wise to allow her such vices at present. She looked at herself critically in the glass of her dressing-room, and it seemed to her overwrought imagination that already — already — the slight hips had thickened, and there was a horrible maturity about her figure. An intense depression had seized upon her, and when Janet brought her some dinner — for she could not leave the theatre for it — she found her sobbing before the glass with her face in her hands.

"My word! What on earth's the matter with you?" said the maid quickly, but her sharp glance told that she knew well enough. "Has Hughes been cutting up rough? No? Mr. Allonby been round? What is it, then?" She did not wait for an answer, but put the tray down beside her mistress. "You must eat something — you're only overtired. Come along — you've got all the rest of the rehearsal to sing through yet."

But for once Beauty was not to be bullied into common sense, and Janet began to be really afraid of a breakdown. The girl must get through the show tomorrow night, even though she gave in immediately

afterwards. Had they over-estimated her strength? Was her coming motherhood really so far advanced as to make the part a physical impossibility to her? The Duke was not in town, or Janet, at her wits' end, would almost have sent him a warning that there might be a fiasco to-morrow night, but he was not able to see the first performance, and would come up a week or so later. Janet coaxed, and scolded, and soothed for twenty minutes before she could induce her charge to eat and drink, and then it was by no means a satisfactory meal.

"I'll have to get you a cup of soup or bovril or something during the next act," she said, half distracted. "It's simply silly to go on like this. Who's there? Oh, it's Mr. St. Gotherd! You can't come in, sir. Miss Darling's resting."

"Let me speak to her for a minute, there's a good girl!" said the familiar voice persuasively. Giddy Goat's voice was rather attractive in speaking, though he sang hoarse. Janet lowered her own in answer.

"I wish you could persuade her to eat, sir! She'll break down if she doesn't, and I can't get her to see reason to-night."

"Let me come and try."— He pushed past Janet before she had decided to allow him, and walked up to the couch where Beauty was lying, white and flaccid, with closed eyes. "Beauty!" he said, leaning down over the listless figure. "Have you had anything to drink?"

"Yes, sir, quite enough — I got her some whisky and soda," Janet broke in. She rarely picked her words.

"Go and get me another glass, and some sand-

wiches. There are plenty in my dressing-room," St. Gotherd said without raising his eyes. Janet left them unwillingly. She was paid to act as watch-dog.

The minute she was gone St. Gotherd bent lower over the girl to bring his lips close to her ear, and spoke softly.

"Beauty, I won't leave go of you in the swing-dance to-night — you needn't be afraid!"

She opened her eyes wide, and their blue was like the night sky, with a star in each. The fear in them seemed to have dried the tears.

"What do you mean?" she asked, with a harsh breath.

"I know you are afraid — I will hold you to-night. You needn't swing only by your arms."

"Mr. Hughes will see!"

"I have settled Hughes."

She drew a tortured breath, like a sob. "Thanks!" she said, with a pitiful effort to speak naturally. "I'm awfully tired, and it does make you feel rather sick. You're a good sort, Giddy!"

"But you must do it to-morrow night —"

"Oh, I'll be all right to-morrow —"

"Now, will you buck up and eat and drink something?"

"I'll try. . . ."

"There's a good girl. I give you my word I'll hold you safe to-night — if in return you'll . . ."

He bent closer and whispered.

"I don't think I dare, Giddy — Hughie would kill me if he knew!"

"Rot! How is he to know? He's not in town."

"Janet.—"

"We'll get rid of Janet somehow. Don't fret now — I'm not going to rush you. I've waited six years — I can wait a little longer."

"Six years! — When I was at the Satyr?"

"Yes — if you hadn't left."

"All right — I'll see. Only don't leave go of me to-night in the swings!" . . .

She was fighting for life itself, though how he had divined her terror of that moment when she swung helpless on her own muscles she did not know. Ordinarily she would have been terrified of the suggestion of infidelity to Leicestershire, but her momentary desperation seemed greater even than her subjection to Hughie. It was mad to think of taking St. Gotherd as a lover at the crucial time when she was to be most dependent on the Duke's generosity; but it seemed madder to her to hang her life on her own slender arms. The confidence which St. Gotherd's hands upon her waist gave her made the last long hours of rehearsal a mere bagatelle to what had gone before, and she seemed to regain a more normal mood with the food and stimulant he had sent for. Hughes made no demur, though the swing-dance was not as it should be at the real performance, and if the crowd commented she did not hear — she hardly cared. No one but a woman in Beauty's condition could have so exaggerated the slight risk and its terrors to her own mind, or have passed so swiftly from one mood to another as she did that night. Even St. Gotherd seemed suddenly a friend, and had assumed a new importance in her life.

Truth to tell, there was something more than mere physical nervousness in her fear. The thought of

what would happen if her hands did give way, if she were flung away in mid-swing by the force of her own impetus, alternated across her mind like trembling shadow and dazzling light. She was even more afraid of a wild impulse that had once or twice seized her than of an accident. For would not this be a safe deliverance, a final mad dash for safety? The terror that had her by the throat was not normal. The unbalanced revulsion from childbirth had got behind her and driven her forward on many a mad scheme in her own brain, never yet put in practice. Supposing that the impulse seized her suddenly in the dance, and that life seemed intolerable! . . . She shut her dewy blue eyes with a sudden sickness and prayed that she might not think of it again.—

The dress rehearsal ended in the small hours, and the over-worked Company drifted away one by one to their homes (sometimes on the outskirts of London), dead-beat, and feeling every one of them that it was a miracle if the performance went rightly. There was only a certain number of hours between them and the opening night in which to sleep and eat themselves back to some sort of strength to face the strain. Sceneshifters, limelight men, stage-hands, went out wearily into the dawn, and thanked Heaven that at least they were not the Stage-Manager; for Sydney Hughes did not leave the theatre until half-past six that morning, and as the taxi took him swiftly homeward he remembered fifteen things that would necessitate his being back at his work some hours before the curtain was rung up. Much will be entered in the book of the Recording Angel against the name of Syddie Hughes, and if it is noted that he could

swear like a ruffian, be sure that it will also stand to his credit that he never left his "job" while he could stand up to it, or neglected a responsibility.—

The morning's post brought a scrap of comfort to distract Beauty Darling.

Her old friend Dr. Hardinge was in London by chance, and he and Michael Phayre would be in the House on the first night to see her, as Michael had always contrived to be when she was playing. Beauty knew that Michael was married, or about to be, but had never written to ask him to bring his wife to see her. She had a fierce resentful sense that he might avoid doing so, even if he did not refuse; and she could not brook having Meta set above her, even for such subtle reasons as might influence Michael Phayre, and which would never have influenced her at all. But it was like the old Michael to come on a first night, anyway, and she brightened. Dr. Hardinge wrote, as he had always done, with news of his sister and of Dublin, and a kindly congratulation on her success, which he was looking forward to see. She fancied that Michael could not have told him of her connexion with the Duke, though it was practically public property. Beauty had never gauged the meaning of charity, or of such natures as her two friends.

Dr. Hardinge had gone to Chelsea almost as soon as he arrived in London, and had been introduced to Michael's wife in the small rooms they still occupied off Church Street. They had married before they would have done owing to the sudden death of Mrs. Chumleigh, and the girl being left alone in the world; but it had never been personal poverty that kept them apart. If Meta had had anyone to push her as Allonby

had pushed Beauty Darling, she would have remained on the Comedy stage and been content to work hard even though she never reached the top of the ladder; but she had no chance of doing anything but walk on in London, and unless the future were very black, indeed, Michael did not want her to go on tour and spend some seven months of their year apart from him. They were both frankly agreed that she should not try again for Musical Comedy, in London or out of it.

"Not that it's a bad life if you know the ropes," Phayre said boyishly to Dr. Hardinge. He was sitting on the edge of the little platform he had put up on which to pose his models, with his hands hugging his knees. The studio was really the one sitting-room that he and Meta had. But she retired to a small kennel of a dining-room to darn Michael's socks when he was at work, as she explained. "No, it's not a bad life — no life need be bad. But it's a strain to be always putting on the brakes downhill and to steer at the same time."

"And in the present state of things so much depends on the steering," said Meta quietly. "I was unlucky enough to be in the same piece as Mr. St. Gotherd the last time I played in Musical Comedy, and — I believe I made an enemy of him for ever."

"Was it so bad as that?" said Dr. Hardinge comprehensively.

Meta looked up at her husband frankly. "Shall we tell him?" she said.

"Yes, go on," he answered with a nod.

"He came up behind me and put his hand on my neck under my pinafore — you know we all wear pinafores in Musical Comedy at rehearsal to save the

dresses. And when I asked him to go away he told me not to be a little fool — no one would see. Then I lost my temper, and told *him* not to be a bigger fool and annoy a girl who did not want his attentions."

Dr. Hardinge's eyes began to twinkle. Phayre nodded. "Yes, she really did," he said. "It answered better than tragedy or tears."

"He said, 'I believe you really mean it,'" remarked Meta, going on with the needlework in her lap. "And he left me alone after that. But I heard that he said to Mr. Walton that it was a pity to have dull and dowdy girls in the chorus, and the Satyr was not nearly so smart as Allonby's. That was one reason why I got my notice soon after, I believe," she ended simply.

"And yet you do not call that a bad life?" said Dr. Hardinge thoughtfully.

"It sounds unfair," said Michael cheerfully. "But I don't know that it is. A certain class of woman has gone on the Musical Comedy stage and made a tradition, and the men about the theatre expect to profit by it. Then there comes a straight girl who upsets their calculations, and from their standard they say that *that* is unfair. Nevertheless, you see the girl can go straight if she pleases."

"She must know the ropes a little, as you said, first of all," said Meta gently. "It isn't the men inside the theatre so much as those outside, really. Of course, very bad cases are rare, but they do occur, and there is always the possibility."

"Tell me the bad case," said Dr. Hardinge. He was thinking of Beauty Darling.

"It was a girl at the Satyr; she had not fallen into

Mr. O'Donnovan's hands, but one of the chorus men managed to introduce her to a friend of his — a man with money — who wanted her."—

"If she hadn't gone to supper it would have been all right," interrupted Michael. "That's what Meta means by 'knowing the ropes.'"

"Not always, Michael: sometimes it is the girls who are the birds of prey, and the men are merely made to pay for the supper. But in this case the girl thought there was no harm, and went with the man to some disreputable restaurant. When he found that things were not going as he wished, he drugged her."

"I should have said that was impossible," said Dr. Hardinge quickly. "It is not easy to drug without collusion."

"The waiter had been bribed, you see; and the cabman who drove them on to the man's room was bribed. That was an exceptional case, because the man was determined to get hold of that particular girl."

"What did she do?"

"She went with the crowd after that," said Meta Phayre, and there was the shadow of a great patience on her face. "She said what was the use of fighting Fate — the thing was done, and no one thought anything of it. When I knew her she was supposed to be one of the fastest of the Satyr girls; but I always felt there was something to like in her. She told me her story one day."

"Yes; and she didn't lie," added Michael. "The man who sold her to his friend corroborated the statement as something to his own credit."

"He adds considerably to his salary by such introductions," said Meta dryly. "The girl was called

Mona Morley — she was a friend of Beauty Darling's."

"Poor Beauty!" said Dr. Hardinge, with a sudden, hopeless pang. "There is no way out for her, I'm afraid, Mrs. Phayre."

Meta raised her grave eyes with a little questioning expression. "Don't you think that one must set a new standard, and call it a question of compensations?" she said. "Beauty has certain things she wants, and certain necessities of her nature are satisfied. If she will only not run into excesses, of excitement or debt, I don't know that she will not be happier on the whole than if she had married a man such as Barbara Sinclair did, or even a boy of the type of Lord Hermal."

"It isn't the morality of the moment I was thinking about," Dr. Hardinge confessed. "As you say, one sets a new standard for a girl born and bred and brought up as Beauty Darling has been. But Beauty will never make successful speculations in life — she is not a financier of existence. And then there comes an inevitable To-morrow."

"Poor Beauty!" — Michael Phayre spoke very kindly. "But it is just that failure for which one loves her. If she had been of the coarser grain of Miss Cherry Bough or Miss Folly Bird, she would have looked more to the future, and would have been less like the butterfly basking in the present sun. But it is for that very lack of prudence — almost stupidity — that one wants to protect her."

Hardinge rose from the shabby arm-chair he had been occupying, and began to walk up and down the untidy room, shoving plaster figures and gutta-percha

models out of his way unconsciously. When he was roused the old doctor was always restless.

"I can see no way out for her," he said, frowning with his grizzled brows. "No way out. Poor Beauty! Such a perfect piece of flesh and blood that men could not leave it alone, but must needs spoil it as soon as may be. Oh, these girls! How they make our hearts ache when they are strong, and make us hold our breath when they are weak!"

Phayre crossed the room to his wife's side and kissed her hair. "How dare you make Dr. Hardinge's heart ache, Meta!" he said whimsically. "But you will never make him hold his breath."—

"We had a lady to see us the other day who rather puzzled us," said Meta, turning to the doctor. "Was she weak or strong, I wonder? She came with Sir Rupert — you know, Michael's R.A. friend. Her name is Lady Jane Noble, and she paints."

"She has the right feeling too," said Phayre, with an odd glint of the professional in his eyes. "I should like to have helped her a little."

"She said that no one could help her," said Meta musingly. "I wondered so much what she meant. I am sure it wasn't only in art."

"She has married that Captain Noble who ran after Beauty," said Phayre quietly. "That is what she meant, perhaps."

"Toujours Beauty!" said Dr. Hardinge.

The sentiment seemed to find an echo that very night in the theatre, when the new piece opened. It was "toujours Beauty" indeed! Despite the inevitable blunders of a first performance the play was obviously going to be a success, and it was the more

amazing because the plot was more scattered, the situations more impossible, the burlesque of life more dull and sordid, than is usual even in Musical Comedy. The music was of the waltziest order (there were at least five waltz tunes for the principal solos, waltz time and rhythm being for some occult reason the easiest vehicle for dreamy passion), and the "Fancy me your Fancy Boy" song and dance for St. Gotherd was lugged in by the hair as it were, and had no bearing on the plot whatever. Hardinge and Phayre looked at each other in a kind of amazed despair. For the pitiful point of it all was that a wave of Imperialism was passing over London, and the Management had scored a point by advertising the piece as of British manufacture — the author was English, the lyrics were English, the composer, alas! was typically English in his efforts. "No wonder that we adapt so much from the French and German as a rule, if this is all that England can produce!" said Phayre in comic desperation. But the play was going to be a success, and to run for a year at least, owing to three things — first, the English manufacture, which, without the least originality, had appealed to public taste with all the worst popularities; second, Gideon St. Gotherd, who was always a draw, and earned his hundred pounds a week by the ape-like methods he had made his own, capering madly to lift the flatness of the scenes upon his emasculate shoulders; and third, Beauty Darling, the all-but-acclaimed courtezan, thrusting her fair face and body into the gaps of the plotless plot and pointless dialogue.

Toujours Beauty! — the friends might have said it over and over as the piece progressed, and the heroine

of it sang, and smiled, and was played round, as children play round a flower-decked maypole. She did not act herself, because she could not; but she repeated her words with suitable gestures and tones, as she had been taught. By the same token she danced a little, but not much. Beauty was never a dancer. She lacked the fire and the strength and the instinct which is part of the training. But it all served well enough, and her voice at least was above the average. Save that the top notes sounded a little sharp if anything, she had lost none of its roundness and sweetness despite the strain upon her, and to-night she was making a double effort, for fear that St. Gotherd might have guessed something. Why had he promised to hold her last night in the swing dance, and told her he knew she was frightened? He had kept his word, but why had he suggested it? In the desperate fatigue and terror of the dress rehearsal she had not asked herself this question — she had been thankful for the respite. But in the morning and all day before the first performance she began to torture herself afresh. He must not know — no one must know — yet. Even if they guessed later on, she could not have them know in her panic-stricken present. For a month at least she could keep on with her part, and then it would be easier to take a rest.—

The house from the stage looks nothing but a black gulf, and it is exceedingly difficult for the chorus girls to distinguish anyone even in the front rows of the stalls or the boxes. This is very aggravating when some new "boy" is sending them round notes and presents, and explaining where he sits, because it would be useful to inspect him from the other side of the

floats before replying to his advances. Of course, if you know who is there it is easier to act at them, even if you cannot clearly see them. Beauty could not have distinguished Dr. Hardinge and Phayre in the dress circle even if she had tried, and she was equally unaware of the presence of Lord and Lady Hermal (Folly was just married, and had left the Satyr for the time being), but she recognized Sir Everton Toff — old Toffee — in a box with other men, and the Maidenbridges. The boxes nearest the stage were comparatively easy to see, despite the delusive reflection of the floats, and were all well filled. Beauty directed her attention to them at her first opportunity. . . .

God! What was that? Across the gulf of blackness and the misleading flare some dim and horrible memory seemed to hover, something hardly definite, but like the pang of a raw nerve. A party of men were in the box on the prompt side, and one rising to look at the house appeared for a second in prominence. The evil head hung a moment in space before Beauty's eyes, like a mask of unrelenting Fate, then dropped down again into an indistinguishable blur as he took his seat. He was here then, like some ominous shadow, and the uneducated fear of those who are naturally superstitious took hold on Beauty's mind that this boded no good to her. The encounter in Piccadilly had been nearer, but hardly so revolting to her as this. For it was Trevor Guy.

If she had had any words to say at the moment Beauty would have "dried up" and forgotten them; but she had seized the opportunity of the hero's appeal to her — in waltz time, of course — to look round the house. By the time she had to join in she had suffi-

ciently mastered her nerves to do so creditably, though the thing she had seen remained with her and made her feel a little cold. That he knew who she was she could not doubt, and remembered his part in her first undoing. She fancied his grating laugh to think of it. It turned her sick to imagine a chance meeting with him — that he might even worm his way round to her dressing-room to-night, and she would have thrown herself on anyone's mercy to prevent it — Janet's, St. Gotherd's, even Hughes's. The grinning spectre of the past rising up before her now seemed the last strain that was snapping the thread of her endurance. But there was more to come.

"Mr. Allonby has sent round some champagne for you," said Janet, when Beauty returned to her dressing-room between the acts. This was an unusual proceeding on Allonby's part, for he had so far kept back the wine until the play was safely over; but his wise eyes saw an urgent necessity, and he had had a few minutes with his leading lady before the curtain first rose. "Now don't go drinking without eating anything, or it will go to your head!"

"Give it to me — I must have something," said the girl in a spent voice. She leaned her head against the other woman's unfriendly bosom and broke down. "Oh, Janet, I'm out of it! I'm out of it! I can't go on!"

"My word! This is worse than last night!" muttered Janet, holding some of the wine to Beauty's lips. "You do look done! You'll have to rouge again. What's upset you?"

"There's a man in the house I haven't seen for years," whispered Beauty, clinging even to the sup-

port of Janet in her weakness. "Don't let him come here, for Christ's sake!"

She meant that; for the nonce it was no blasphemy, but such a prayer as a dying man might pray. Janet's eyes opened wide with curiosity and sharp interest. Of all things she had not credited Beauty Darling with any dread of her past — a dread that might prove useful as a tool to handle, even as she meant to handle her knowledge of the new Lady Hermal. Such slips as Beauty had made Janet regarded as causing her no particular discomfort; but there was more than shame here — there was abject fear. She almost shook Beauty in her excitement and determination to rouse her.

"Of course I'm not going to let anyone in. (There's Giddy Goat at the door now.— Go *away*, Mr. St. Gotherd! I shan't open the door.) Tell me who it is?"

"A man named Trevor Guy — don't tell anyone else, Janet."

"I'm not such a fool. I heard the Duke tell you he wasn't fit for a woman to know." Janet did not often betray that she overheard private conversations; but she was off her guard. "Why, it's that man who painted the picture of you!"

"Yes."— The long shiver of the limbs would have touched a softer heart.

"What's he like? I'd better know him."—

"A tall man — elderly."—

"Second act, please!" said the call-boy at the door. "Five minutes!"

Beauty drank her wine and ate a sandwich fever-

ishly, while Janet added more rouge to her quivering face.

"She'll just get through it, and no more," said the maid shrewdly to herself. "I must have a squint at this Guy. Wonder whether there's something to be made out of *him!*"

On the stage the chorus were being grouped for an Arctic wedding at the North Pole, and the cotton-wool "snow" with which the bride was to be pelted was dealt out to each in turn. It was a pretty opening to the act, but by no means original.

"Props! Where's Props?" echoed on all sides, and the unhappy property master was seen running to and fro with his hair on end, as property masters often seem to wear it, and small wonder! Arches of icicles were upheld over the heads of the show girls who came down in procession and took their usual stand at the footlights, and a light cart all glittering with frost and snow was ready to roll in at the wings with Beauty Darling enthroned on an iceberg — or should have been. Props? Where is Props?

"Get back on the prompt side! Damn you, get out of the way there, child! Miss Darling — where's Miss Darling?"

"Here I am, Mr. Hughes."

"Will you get up in the cart now? There will be no one to help you at the moment — every one's on. They have to rush off and drag you in —."

Beauty's entrance was after the rise of the curtain, to give her the centre of the stage and the eyes of the audience, which never focus for the first few minutes. But she had not long to wait. She elected to climb

into the cart at once, and laughed a little hysterically as two of the chorus men helped her in.

"Don't overturn me as you drag me in!" she said. "This cursed cart is crazy, I think. The wheels won't go round."

"Props! Where Props!"

Props ran to demonstrate that the cart was all right — it only wanted turning on the slant of the stage and it would run down to the floats of itself. The green light in the wings warned those who could not hear another signal that the curtain was going up, and the great flies sucked it into themselves, and the act went on.

Half-way through came the swing dance. The stage was emptied save for Beauty Darling and Gideon St. Gotherd, the two prime favourites, for the real hero of the play hardly mattered. St. Gotherd was chief Comedian, and even Jester, the second "funny man," was better loved by the audience than the lead — always excepting those ladies who admired his figure and sent him notes to his dressing-room as flagrant as any received by the Allonby girls from their "Best Boys." The second lights were turned on, red from the floats, red from the flies, and the band began the effect of the evening, the waltz that accompanied the swings.

Beauty had been wrought up to this moment. It is not an easy thing for a girl to swing by the clasp of her arms round a man's neck, or for the man to stand the strain of her weight. Gideon St. Gotherd owed his capacity to his long training as a dancer — it was the knack he possessed rather than the strength. Beauty owed hers to her supple body, and her slight

training as a dancer also. There was no real danger, only a chance of skill, or the Management would never have sanctioned it. Yet as the stage cleared and the red lights went up, the girl caught her breath with an almost supernatural dread. She was not imaginative, but it seemed like the reflection of hell-fire to her, and herself doomed to torment. There was no dialogue — St. Gotherd took a gliding step towards her and caught her on his arm, a mass of draped chiffon under which she wore no corset, for she wanted the help of every muscle untrammelled. He felt the live waist beneath his hand, and pressed her closer as their feet began to move in rhythm. Beauty turned her head instinctively and looked over her own shoulder at their two shadows, almost red too in the red glow. Something in the aversion of her face seemed to inflame her partner, and a wicked light leaped under his drooping lids.

"Hold tight in the swings, Beauty," he whispered, just before the moment when she must clasp her hands round his neck. "I will keep my balance — *but remember, I carry double!*"

She gave a convulsive shiver and locked her hands; then, as he spun, the whole meaning of what he had said came back on her. Her light feet left the stage, and her body began to revolve in a circle round him, her rosy chiffons parting and closing to display her form to the waist. She swung straight out for a minute, while the madness of her despair blazed in her brain; he knew — the world knew — that awful face in the box there would know and mouth at her. Then, with an irresistible impulse, she broke her hands apart while her feet were towards the House, and her body

was flung far forward into the shrieking orchestra, who crouched and fled. She struck upon the rail and fell.—

The House rose with one cry. There was a rush forward, and the shriek upward that she was killed, while the pit surged to the barriers, and the gallery yelled inarticulate horror. Some one in the band raised her, and carried the limp body out through the barriers, round by the stage box, behind the scenes again, while the red lights went out and the curtain came down. Then a man in evening dress came in front with a white face, and said that Miss Darling was not dead, but much injured; the play could not go on. And people gathered up their wraps, shivering, and left, talking in disjointed whispers.

At the stage-door a crowd of men in evening dress struggled with the police for news from the door-keeper, and the answer was still the same: "Not dead, but we think dying." A doctor had made his way behind, as soon as the girl was carried out, and there in the nearest dressing-room — not her own, but Gideon St. Gotherd's — was making his examination. He was joined by a colleague, an elderly man with grey hair, who said he knew Miss Darling and was a friend of hers.

"Better let her see him first, then, if she rallies," said the Stage-Manager hurriedly, drawing the girl who played second lead away, for she was crying heartily, with the abandonment of her kind.

"Oh! do you think she will live, Mr. Hughes? Oh, poor Beauty! Is she in any pain, doctor?"

Dr. Hardinge lifted his kind, shrewd eyes and said, "Hush!"— for the lids had quivered, the lips con-

tracted in the injured girl's face. Then it settled into oblivion again, and she seemed likely to lie so to the end, though still breathing.

"Try some more brandy," said the other doctor, as a last resource. "Lift her head — she may swallow now."

A man who had entered the dressing-room behind Dr. Hardinge stepped forward before he did, and lifted the girl's head. It was done so skilfully that the doctors did not interfere, but at the touch of his hands Beauty Darling opened her flower-blue eyes wide, and sighed, as if something had reached her even through the mists fast closing round. That magical touch! Those wizard's fingers! — the man was behind her head, out of sight, and yet she uttered a strangled cry. It was Dr. Hardinge on whom her conscious glance rested, but her sharpened instinct told her that malignant Fate had brought her once more into physical contact with Trevor Guy. . . .

Outside the stage-door Michael Phayre walked up and down, up and down, till past midnight. He could not get past the barriers of officialism, even if he had tried; but he did not try. He waited for Dr. Hardinge, and looked up at the stars and the kind April sky, seeing once again in his mind Beauty Darling's upturned face in the moment of her triumph, before she flew outward and fell with that sickening crash — the young, soft face, with its wonderful outlines of jaw and throat, and the glossy curls falling backwards from her forehead! He saw her as some perfect thing, as yet undespoiled to men's eyes, and in the bloom of the face and body that God had given her. . . . A woman passed him in the dark byway, and begged of

him. He gave her pence mechanically, and hoped that she would buy gin and a little forgetfulness. For her face even in the dim light was terrible, and her hoarse voice might once have been sweet. It was the drink that had brought her to it — not the shame. The life that began and ended in excitement led from one dissipation to another, until it came to this — fluttering rags and a hoarse voice that begged. . . . He turned back to the stage door, leaning his shoulder wearily against the doorway, and his strained eyes saw Dr. Hardinge coming out to tell him what he waited to hear.

"She is dead," said Hardinge briefly.

Both men lifted their hats as if by instinct, and stood bareheaded under the stars of the wild spring sky.

"Thank God!" said Michael Phayre.

THE END

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